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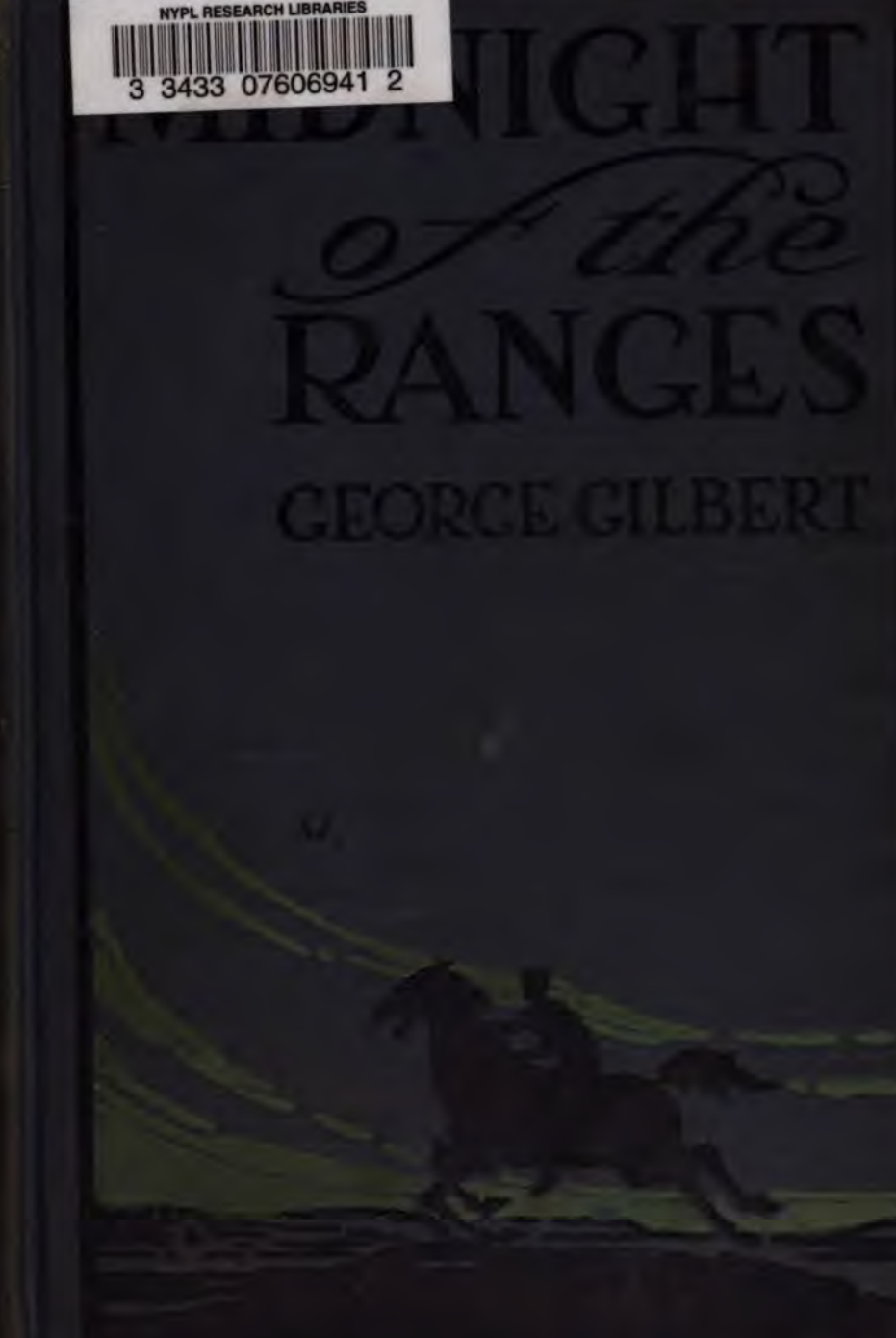
MIDNIGHT *of the* RANGES

GEORGE GILBERT



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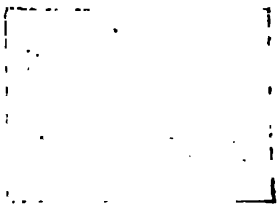

And Midnight? He just whickered. FRONTISPIECE.

MIDNIGHT OF THE RANGES

BY

GEORGE GILBERT

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

GEORGE W. GAGE

L.C.

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1920

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TO

MY WIFE

WHOSE SYMPATHY AND COURAGE HAVE SUSTAINED ME AND
GIVEN ME THE STRENGTH TO PERSEVERE, AND TO THE
LITTLE PARTNER, NOW GROWN UP, WHOSE INTEREST
IN MY EARLIEST EXTEMPORIZED WONDER-TALES
FIRST GAVE ME THE IDEA THAT I MIGHT
SOME DAY INTEREST A WIDER AUDIENCE,
AND TO BOB DAVIS, FRIEND OF MAN,
THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED

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MIDNIGHT OF THE RANGES

MIDNIGHT OF THE RANGES

CHAPTER I

HE PACKS TWO GUNS!

FRIENDLY blue-gray eyes a-twinkle in their nets of sun-born wrinkles; light brown hair flaring out whimsically from under the clasp of his pushed-up broad-brim, Ed Burlane lolled in the saddle atop Midnight and listened in comfort to the row. For the stocky, gnarled, sprandle-legged big man with the butt of his six-gun snugged into the grip of his right hand, weapon half drawn, had the "age" on the man he was discussing so successfully and cussing so gracefully; and half of the population of Coppered Jack knew it and was watching from the outside of the town's straggling buildings, and the other half knew it and was watching from inside, out of the line of possible fire.

"You onery, dog-faced, no-'count, long-legged, swallow-tailed man-skinner," the man with the "age" fleered, his voice heavy, ominous. "I got to my gun first. I 've got ye cold, Bart

Barnquist! Ye own or graze them big herds o' yourn over half o' San Felicé County, but there's my lil shack an' home spot, an' it stays with me. I 'm a son of a Native Son, so there 's no way yo' c'n ho'nswaggle me out o' my home; Texas law won't 'low it, dog-gone you' hide."

"You ca'm down, Peters," the threatened man pleaded, his face red, sweat on his forehead, from which his sombrero was pushed back. His hands were up; his gun swung futilely as his body swayed with tremors of fear. "I ain't projectin' to git your mite o' a ranch — I 'm only talkin' lease — "

"Then why n't ye quit shoving an' pushing ag'in my bound'ries with those irrigation ditches o' yourn? Ye got all th' water you c'n use, but you 're bound to have my two springs runnin' into your pipes? An' you quit rollin' fakirs ag'in me with those papers to sign, which if I sign, loses me my water holdin's for a few measly dollars to you. Get me? "

The hand holding the gun barely tensed, yet the gun, like a living thing, had leaped forth, and its muzzle was against the lower, left-side ribs of the threatened man, the barrel inclined gently upward, in line with the heart.

"I 'll — quit," the cornered Barnquist slobbered; "I 'll let you alone — "

"You better! I been badgered an' pestered *ee*nuff! Twin Springs suits me an' it suits

Ber'nice, my gal. We stick till we move ourselves, Barnquist. Tell that to all your runners-up an' no-'count hirelings an' man-killin' deputies that you c'n control. If there 's any more scrougin' onto me, or loco-weed balls dropped into my corral or strychnine put into th' waterin' troughs, you 'll jus' die — sudden. I won't spend no time a-shooting it out with those hired men o' yourn; I 'll come to you an' I 'll come a-shooting and I 'll get you, cold turkey, if so be I c'n. Ever' slug my gun throws is nicked on th' nose, so they 'll spread, too, and one o' them slugs sure would sprandle out wide in your yellow fat."

He ceased. The street was quiet. Men here and there, frozen in their interest, combined with fear of the gunman whose facile draw had proved his lethal skill in handling his chosen weapon, shifted their weight, sighed or spat. Peters swept a single glance off Barnquist, but it took in everything up and down the way, before, behind, on both sides. Then he turned sidewise, whisked about a building, and was gone, with a speedy and panther-like energy that defied pursuit. Before they had awakened, the spellbound folk, to the fact, he had mounted, for the rataplan of horse's hooves from behind the Thimble Belt saloon told of Peters' home-going up the alley behind the town's few business places.

Ed Burlane, who had followed the actions of the big man with such amused interest, smiled as

he heard the thrumming of the hooves that told of Peters' disappearance. He swept his glance about and noted how, the danger gone, men came swarming out, buzzing, gesticulating. Three or four fellows, plainly hangers-on, came to Barnquist's side and began to counsel with him as to what measures should be taken.

Barnquist, tugging savagely at the left horn of his black moustache, caressed the butt of his gun with his right hand.

"We c'n git a posse together an' skull drag him out 'n his hole, an' mebbe he 'll try to shoot it out an' then. . . ."

So began one of the hangers-on, a man with a dry, hard voice, very light hair and eyebrows so thin and lacking in color they seemed not to exist in certain plays of light and shade. His eyes were like agates, cold, unfeeling, keen.

"You 're whirling a bigger loop than you c'n throw," Barnquist cut him off with, "bellerin' right out with all hell listenin' to you shoot your wad, Maltrane."

"I 'm generally able t' throw any loop I whirl," the other crisped, falling back, "but I did n't see you makin' any fancy moves while ol' Peters had you stuck up."

"No; I don't work by main strength," Barnquist answered, quieter now and in full control of himself. "Why did n't you do something, Maltrane?"

"Man, I was taking forty winks in th' Thimble Belt, an' only woke up when it was all over. I was leanin' against th' back wall with my chair tilted back. You ask Barnum, th' barkeep."

"He sure was a-snoozin'"; another man confirmed. He was a little, wiry, spluttery fellow, with a much chewed pipestem in constant motion between nervously active teeth. "He was lost in dreams, far away."

By now a score of men had swarmed about Barnquist. He waved them aside and started to plow through the crowd toward the Thimble Belt. But Midnight, towering up, was in the way. Burlane was looking down amusedly, his smile proving his enjoyment of the scene. He had ridden in quietly to come squarely against the little street drama unrolling and had stopped his horse to watch the row, of a kind not uncommon in old times in the long-horn country.

The good horse did not move. Midnight only heeded one voice, — Ed's. Burlane had reared the big stallion from colthood when he had worked for the X. M. T. outfit near Vernon, Texas, and had found the colt almost starved, its mother dead. Ed had bottle-fed the little fellow at first, then made him his own special pet, had broken him, put the first saddle on him, and so the bond between them was strong, enduring. Unless Ed spoke or twitched rein, Midnight would not move from where he had been halted.

Barnquist broke eruptively through the human ring, head down, bull-like, intent.

"C'm on into th' Belt, you two," he called to Maltrane and the sputtery, wiry man; "you, Maltrane an' Weaver, c'm on."

He half turned, continued his headlong onset. The people had parted from before him like chips before a wave. He butted his head into the solid haunch of Midnight. The horse did not move, except to toss his head.

Barnquist drew back and for the first time saw the obstacle against which he had hurtled so blindly. Saw also the easy, good-natured smile of Ed Burlane, as he lolled in his saddle, viewing the whole scene with the air of a philosopher.

"Git that hoss outa th' way," Barnquist snarled.

"You seem to resemble youse'f," Ed dropped down pleasantly from his serene height.

Barnquist's face became purple. Maltrane and Weaver, backing him up, thrust forward belligerently. Weaver, spluttering, champed on his pipe's stem; Maltrane's agate eyes clashed in glances with Ed's own that by now were steadying to keen regard of the trio.

Barnquist smacked his lips in a peculiar manner. The nimble hands of Maltrane and Weaver slid weapon-ward —

"I'd not do that, if I were you, hombres!"

Burlane hardly seemed to stir, yet move

melting into move, his hands had flashed, one to each hip and, with sure-fire accuracy of the born two-gun man, his .45's flicked into line. The two hireling killers froze. Barnquist stilled.

A pressure of Burlane's knee, a whispered word, and Midnight quietly stepped offside, but so steadily that Ed's weapons did not deviate by a hair's breadth from their aim.

"Now, go where you was a-goin' an' be quick," he ordered. "*Vamoose, poco pronto!* I'm not aimin' for trouble hereabouts, but I'm not dodgin' any that comes my way. I'm just ridin' for a job, after quitting X. M. T., an' if you'll inquire back to Vernon, *they'll tell you who I am.*"

The baffled trio stalked by the big black horse, whose ears were cocked at them and whose aristocratic nose sniffed at them in passing. The twin guns kept in line until the trio had passed behind the swinging doors of the saloon. Then, at a touch of Ed's heel, the giant equine wheeled, as if on a pivot, and was going under a dust cloud at the town's edge before any of the spectators could gather their wits.

As the horse galloped off, the saloon door slammed back, and Weaver, gun in hand, appeared. He swung the weapon up, his left hand crossed over right, the wrist of the right hand firm against the wrist of the left that was atop, — in the attitude for a long-range shot. He was

steadying for the pull when a bluff, tall young man yelled from the crowd:

"Put it up, now; put it up!"

The speaker broke from the crowd and came to Weaver's side in a few strides. He was ruddy of face, well built, eager, alert. His eyes were deeply set; his hair black, intensely so. A neat suit of wide-wale corduroy, a fine pair of high-heeled riding boots, a silver-trimmed Stetson completed a costume that became him well, the neck being encircled with a white and black checked handkerchief, carelessly knotted under the collar of his gray flannel shirt. Plainly he was of the blood of Barnquist, — the inheritance of shifty, glittering black eyes told that, as well as the bulk of torso and limbs.

Maltrane had thrown the gun's muzzle out of line at the other's first word, striking over Weaver's shoulder from inside the saloon to do it. Weaver grinned knowingly at the young man who had given the command.

"All right, Barney," he agreed, holstering the weapon.

"What d' y' mean, letting him get off like that?" and Barnquist came through the swinging doors of the saloon quickly.

"Barney here said — "

"Who 's bossin' Ox Bow ranch, me or Barney?" Barnquist demanded.

"I reckon you are," Maltrane said coldly.

"Then — "

"You let Mal be, old man," the young man said; "I saw it all, an' I 've got an idea — "

"Let's get under cover then; no use shooting our wad before all the town, pup," the father growled.

Barney took Maltrane's arm and nudged him into the saloon. His father followed. A dozen men edged in, on one excuse or another, to find the father, son and two retainers gone into a rear room, where their voices, rumbling, could be heard. Parley Brown, lean, morose, evaded queries with the saloon keeper's usual skill, and gradually it sifted into the united consciousness of the populace of Coppered Jack that the town's boss wanted no enlightenment or assistance, and the men dribbled out by ones, twos or threes, leaving the barroom vacant save for Barnum, wiping up the last drops of spilled liquor, and Brown, one ear cocked toward that tightly closed back room where the four still talked in heavy undertones that defied all attempts at eavesdropping.

The saloon keeper ordered:

"You, Barnum, I 'm going in there, as Barnquist said to. You watch an' discourage any attempts to listen in against the partition."

The bartender cocked one sly eye at the Thimble Belt's owner, nodded casually, and continued his wiping-up process. That completed, he stood at ease against the back of the rough bar,

his lantern-jawed face avid with a curiosity as to what was going on behind the partition, but his dull, sunken eyes denoting the caution of his ilk, — a caution that kept him away from the dangerous sport of eavesdropping on the quartet behind the screening boards, where the buzz of half-muted tongues told of plans being made, plans of evil omen.

Coppered Jack! The very name the proof of some hectic moment in border annals! Vernon was far off to the east, southeast; to northwest was Twin Springs, and the main trail that forked to there went on and on, whiffed to powdery dust by hooves of plodding teams from Little Soda. To the south was but the open range, rolling, vacant, for many an hour's lope toward Mexico and, almost directly southeast of Coppered Jack, were the huge Barnquist holdings, some legal, some illegal, more preëmpted by right of the six-gun's eminent domain. And a little below the Barnquist place, typical of its sort, was the Chaparral Cock, a mere wayside *aguardiente* joint. So, the geography of the region fixed, the saloon keeper, Parley Brown, going to the dividing door, claims attention.

Brown tapped at the rough-boarded door to the rear room. The buzzing of voices ceased and he was given:

"Come in, Brown, if tha 's who 't is."

He dodged in and shut the door carefully.

The four — Barnquist, his son, Maltrane and Weaver — were grouped about a table, seated on up-ended boxes.

"Room clear?" Barnquist demanded, his heavy-jowled face less red, now that his anger was in leash.

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down," and Barnquist wagged a crooked forefinger toward a vacant box seat.

Brown obeyed. The four drew their heads in toward the table's center; Brown's joined them. They began to confer again in low tones, Barnquist leading.

"Parley Brown, we 've got to meet this defi o' Peters."

"Yes, boss; two blazers run on you in one day calls for a showdown."

"Oh, that range rider from over Vernon way has gone. Folks will forget him if we don't stir him up," Barney Barnquist cut in with.

"He sure had a ready pair of weapons," Weaver spluttered, champing his pipestem loudly.

"You 'd 'a' had him, if Barney had n't stopped you," Maltrane offered.

"Yes, Lars, an' we 'd had the hull X. M. T. outfit over to see what happened to him," Barney countered with. "I 'm only a little better 'n of age, but I got some sense a'ready, if dad does call me pup," with a side glance of sinister import

at his father, who was too intent upon present business to note it.

"How is a question," his father said shortly, "but what 's done is done. First question is, how to run old Peters out of the country. He 's got those twin springs on his place, a clear title — "

"An' a quick draw," Weaver snuffled between bites at his pipe.

"No use rubbing it in thataway, Weav," Maltrane flicked, his white eyebrows down-drawn in a sinister scowl. His agate eyes were hard, glinting.

"No; let 's not spend any time mouthin' over what 's past," the elder Barnquist blurted, yet under his breath; "one thing at a time. How'm we goin' to get Peters? I c'n work it for a warrant, an' we c'n get some of our men deputized — Maltrane and Weaver here and others — and if he shoots it out, he loses. He can't buck the hull law forces of San Felicé County."

"Old man, let me have a throw at this?" Barney offered suddenly.

"You got a plan? *you,* pup? Near time," with keen derision.

"Yes. Peters will be in town soon. You meet him, peaceable. I 'll be with you. We 'll git him into the barroom for a friendly drink, and once inside — Brown here maneuvering to have the room empty, except for us — we c'n frame

something on him that will stick, with only we folks as witnesses."

The elder Barnquist's hand shot out across the rough boards.

"You got a head on you, pup," he let out admiringly. "I allus told the boys here you 'd be wo'th raisin' after you got your gait."

"Sure sounds good," Maltrane agreed.

"Good boy, Barney," Weaver champed on his pipestem.

Brown nodded silent assent.

"And here 's what we frame," Barney went on, as the heads drew in closer and closer. "Ever'one knows old Peters shoots a .38 and that he nicks the nose of ever' bullet, so 't will mushroom or spread out and make a bigger wound. Tha' s why he 's got that name o' Nicked-Nose Peters."

"Yes?" his father breathed, his fat tongue licking his full lips. "Sounds good. You show a few brains, like this, an' you 'll be a man yet."

"Well, we get him in here. Maltrane and Weaver 's in the back room here. When Peters' back is to the door o' this room and he 's drinkin' with us, you two shoot. Maltrane, you shoot *at* Peters with your .45. Weaver, you shoot all around the room, using a .38 and nicked-nose bullets. Weaver, you shoot first, and at the shot Peters will wheel, trying to draw. Pop and I will jump aside. As Peters turns, Maltrane,

you get him. You never miss. Then pop can shoot a couple o' times, at Peters or wild. Weaver grabs Peters' cold gun, shoves his own, that 's like it — they both ordered by mail th' same day, three years ago, remember? Shoves Peters' cold gun in his belt, lays his own hot gun near Peters' hand as if it fell from his grip after he crumpled down."

"I get you, boy," the father whispered tensely; "the crowd comes in, finds Peters dead, me with my gun hot and smokin' and Peters' gun seemingly good and hot; him plugged, me O. K. The ceiling an' walls are full of nicked-nosed bullets. Every one will know what has made them mushroom out so. Weaver c'n manage to shoot once into that pile o' wet bar-clothes Barnum keeps behind th' bar, eh? That will save one nick-nosed bullet unsmashed — a sure proof that Peters was using his gun."

"You got it, pop," the younger Barnquist whispered excitedly, "an' in th' excitement it will pass off that no one will think of Maltrane's gun, seein 's Peters will be plugged, seemingly, by yourn. It will look like —"

"Jus' as if Peters came in, after you 'd made up," Maltrane said; "got onery over his licker, drew, an' Bart beat him out on th' draw an' he shot wild after he was plugged. We c'n all stick to that story. No trial will be necessary."

"No; a coroner's jury — one that we 'd pick

— would bring in a verdict that Peters committed suicide," laughed Weaver, ending in a fit of sputtered champings that testified to his satisfaction with the plot.

"But won't folks notice Peters havin' my gun?" Weaver suddenly spoke up.

"Not in th' bustle," Barney Barnquist judged; "in a minute or two, when a good chance comes, I c'n sneak Peters' gun off somewhere, shoot it out, so it 'll be powder-blackened in barrel and cylinder, substitute it an' give you back yours, Weaver. Who c'n object? Mal here, as resident dep'ty o' this end o' San Felicé, will have charge o' th' corpse and effects until th' sheriff comes in, an' Sheriff Harvison will do 'bout 's pop says, eh?"

"He will," the father snapped; "because he knows who swings th' big bunch o' votes down in this corner that decides th' country's plurality on sheriff. It 's th' Barnquist crowd, eh, boys?"

"Easy 'nuff," champed Weaver.

Maltrane grinned nastily, his cold, hard eyes glittering.

"I c'n see his back before me now," he breathed, "an' I wish 't was right now we were to put th' slug into him."

"If anything goes wrong, I 'll back up your play with my gun — th' new .45 that dad give me a while ago — "

"Mighty little need for you, after Maltrane draws one bead on him, at close quarters and with the 'age' in his favor," Barney Barnquist interjected. "Mal never misses. Peters is 'bout th' onliest man hereabouts c'n beat him on th' draw. But he can't shoot any straighter 'n Mal c'n, though."

"Gimme the 'age' an' I 'll lay him out cold," Maltrane said.

"And now, we all want our parts planned out, so there 'll be no slips," Brown suggested; "let's go over it all, so there can be no mistake on just what each is to do."

"Before we do that, though," Weaver cut in, "we gotta think o' this thing. If we git rid o' Peters, th' little place 'll be his girl's."

"Leave that to me," Barney said suddenly; "I can take care of that part of it."

"Ho, ho," his father laughed; "have you been trying to brand that maverick? I 'll git a lease o' th' water at Twin Springs f'om her, hell-bent quick."

"Yes, an' I 'm sure I c'n throw my loop over her, once her onery dad is out o' th' way."

"Does he object to your seeing her?" the father asked.

"Yes; ordered me off the place a week ago," bitterly. "I overplayed my hand, I guess; got a bit rough with the girl."

"Ha, ha, chip o' th' old block?" his father

laughed, slapping the son on the back. They got up and went out together, only Brown remaining. On the way out Barnum reported that no customers had entered the saloon during their conclave.

CHAPTER II

AT TWIN SPRINGS

WHEN Ed Burlane, swaying easily in his saddle, despite the speed of Midnight, topped the edge of the little cup in which Coppered Jack lay, he saw, off up-trail, the cloud of dust that told of Peters, going fast. Burlane was too sensible to give Midnight his head and let the huge black horse run down Peters' dappled dun cayuse. For to have ridden up suddenly from behind, in a cloud of trail-murk, would have invited and warranted a shot, under the circumstances, as Peters, fleeing from Coppered Jack, would have good reason to suppose that the stranger was after him for a deadly purpose.

Ed contented himself with keeping Midnight in sight of the sign Peters' going cast into the air far ahead. The trail was dry — bone dry. So the dust pillar of the fugitive was a safe guide.

"Looks to me, Midnight," Ed confided to Midnight's off ear, "'s if that old nester ahead o' us two had a job on his hands. An' he 's got a gal with a pretty name. What 's th' use riding after a job when there 's plenty fun right under our noses, eh, old son-of-a-gun?"

Midnight twitched that off ear into which the confidence had been poured. He pranced and made a little *pasear* off-trail, then back, then made up the ground he had lost in a few strides. Ed did n't even notice this, so accustomed was he to the horse's playful ways.

After a time Burlane saw Peters turn down a side trail, toward a group of buttes to the right. On the way they passed the laborers — Mexicans — at work on the Barnquist irrigation ditches. Burlane studied it out and saw how the water from the Peters place could be turned into the ditch easily. It only needed some straight digging across the open plain to bring it about.

Ed let Midnight walk until he could see, in the shadow of the buttes, the sod house, the little corral, the sod barn, the henhouse of the old nester. The windmill creaked cheerily as the evening wind drove it, and the trickle of water it was raising into the troughs where the cattle were watered was pleasant to at least one pair of ears, and Midnight twitched his forward at its tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.

" You go mighty slow, you old son-of-a-gun," Ed cautioned. " We are n't a-going bang up against this old gunman's house without a hail to let him know we 're friendly-like. If we do, he 's more 'n likely to drill us first and investigate afterwards, and serve us right if he did."

At a word the black horse stepped slowly;

then, at another, stilled like a statue. By now they were almost abreast of the house that was fast closed as to doors and windows. A little wreath of smoke over the chimney top told Ed of the supper to come, as did the spicy smell of frying bacon that had remained on the air after the last person in had slammed the portal fast shut.

Peters' tired horse, from the corral bars, whickered. Midnight started a reply, but the weight of Ed's hand on his mane stopped it, dead.

Burlane raised his hand to his lips, cupped it and called:

"Hello, the house!"

There was no reply. Burlane's glance wandered along the low front of the sod house, caught the glint of a muzzle that he was sure had been covering him from the first. He smiled a bit, called again:

"Hello, the house. Will your dog bite?"

"You jus' sit tight whar you be, Young Timer, till I come out," he heard Peters call through the window's crack where the glint of muzzle was. "A gun 's on you. I want to see what so't of a harpen you are, anyways."

"I 'll be good," Ed called, settling back more easily in the saddle, hands openly crossed on the pommel.

"Stay right like that; if you take those han's down, you 'll get a slug," Peters boomed.

"I don't want to be slugged. I want to be fed," Ed laughed.

The door swung open. The old gunman leaped out, his .38 at a "ready." Ed grinned at him.

"Mighty handy with that tool of yourn, Old Timer. I saw you fade that crowd in Coppered Jack."

"I did see ye on the aidge o' th' crowd, sitting on that big black hoss," Peters said, lowering his gun. "Shucks, you ain't nothing to Barnquist?"

"No; I had to throw down on him, too, to get out of town. He tried to butt a hole in my hoss and ordered me out the way."

"He 's a habit of ordering folks off'n th' hull green airth."

"I noticed that. He resembles himself a whole lot."

"Yes; th' resemblance is good, too. Ho, you Ber'nice. It 's all right. Come on out," holstering his gun so smoothly the eye could hardly follow it.

Ed watched the door. In a moment it framed a vision.

Her face was good, — open, filled with womanly charm. The lips were full, sweetly bowed, mobile. Her color was not high; the nose was a bit short, perhaps, and the warm-toned hair strayed over forehead and down the nape of her

neck in wayward attractiveness. She was dressed in a faded print dress, and her shoes were stubbed out as to toes, yet withal she was a girl that any good man would want to know, to please, to make the confidante of his more serious, deeper hours.

Burlane's broad-brim swept low over his saddle as he bowed in answer to her greeting, given at her father's word of explanation.

"You 're sure welcome, stranger; light down, put your hoss in our home corral, an' come in an' he'p us eat supper."

"I sure will," Ed said, with no feigned heartiness. He swung down, stripped saddle and bridle from Midnight with a few deft motions. He clouted the horse with friendly zest into the corral, where Midnight joined the Peters horses eagerly. He hung up horse gear in the barn and then went indoors, to find Peters seated before the table in the large room that did duty as living room and kitchen. Already the girl had a platter of crisped bacon on the table. The odor of coffee, well flavored, came to Ed, and the alluring aroma of pone and baked beans.

"Heap his plate, Ber'nice," her father urged; "we don't of'en get a stranger in to snack with us. Le 's treat him well while we got him."

She stepped about briskly. Ed saw his plate mounded well, sampled the coffee and began to eat. Between bites he told Peters the details of

his encounter with Barnquist, the old nester nodding at him sagely the while.

"You did right to throw down onto him, *pronto,*" he approved; "w'en ol' Barnquist 's on th' prod he 's apt to do anythin' mean an' low-down."

"What 's he so bent on havin' this little nook of yours for?"

"Why, he 's got control of all the good water hereabouts. There 's enough for Coppered Jack from wells there, but Barnquist owns the water rights that are good elsewhere, except these two springs of mine, that I 've got tanked up. We 're changing here from open range to closed. Barnquist sees that water, ditched in and owned outright, will be valuable. He 's surrounding it. He 's 'fraid, he 's let drop so 't I got it, that I 'll have a supply and head him off on the monopoly he wants to get when the Soda Company begins to team its stuff out to the railroad from the Little Desert, where the company owns a small borax slough."

"He opines to make money selling water for the teams and teamsters and mebbe to the railroad that folks say will come through one day," Berenice added, with the direct, easy manner of the plains girl.

"He seems to whirl a mighty big loop," Ed said, luxuriating in the final draught of coffee.

"He sure does, but he 's made it too big when

he 's tried to cover Twin Springs," Peters insisted.

"Your title good?"

"Yes; one of those old Mexican War titles that reads 'as long as grass grows an' water runs.' The little place goes to my gal here, when I 'm through with it."

Ed glanced at her. Her eyes met his frankly, fully. He liked that, no attempt at coyness; no false modesty.

He rolled a cigarette. She was up in a moment and back with two burning, pliant splints, lighted at the hearth, one for Ed, one for her father's pipe.

"You don't suppose they 'll try some underhand game on you?" Ed inquired, after the two men had puffed in silence for a few moments, as the girl quickly and deftly gathered up the dishes and made ready for her household task of after-supper cleansing. The two men had drawn back into one corner of the room to give her full play for her womanly activities.

"They can't try much more 'n they have a'ready," Peters puffed; "they 've tried loco weed, poison, fire arrows shot into my stacks of wild hay — about ever'thing. Including men trying to buy me out on fake papers. I 'm going to stick, by mighty. What they 've done is *ee*nough! This home suits me; I would n't know what to do anywhar else. Me an' Ber'nice has

made a home here together since she was left a babby for me to 'tend, after her mother died. Her mother 's buried out behind the biggest butte. There 's a little clump o' willows there that she wanted to rest under. We 've got a seat there, and Ber'nice tends the grave ever' few days."

"Then you are pretty much alone the most of the time?"

"Pretty much. Ber'nice, she sticks by me. Young Barnquist was projectin' around here for a spell back. But I got rid o' him —"

"I did n't see him. Is he like his dad?"

"Not on top, but down under more so, I guess. I 'd ruther see Ber'nice dead than tied to him."

"Uh, huh," and Ed wagged his head. He rumpled up his hair with his strong fingers. A keen sense of hominess was upon him. He stretched out in his chair, rubbed his lean, long legs and sighed contentedly.

"You ridin' far, Young Timer?" Peters asked.

"Who? Me?" Ed stalled, wondering what he could say.

"Yes, 'cause if you was n't in a hurry —"

"Oh, I 'm not," as the girl came in, bringing the lamp needed to chase away the gathering shadows the dusk had been bringing forth from the room's corners. Berenice went softly out into the outer air, humming a bit of melody.

"You might visit a while. We 'd sure be glad to have you stay. I 've got two or three triflin' jobs that I 've been saving till another man came 'long to he'p, so you need n't feel you 're imposing on me."

Ed puffed contentedly. Out somewhere in the dusk he heard Midnight whicker. He strolled to the door. The girl was at the corral bars; the big stallion's head was over her shoulder. Burlane stared — Midnight, so offish, making up to the girl stranger!

"I 'm just giving him a lump o' sugar, Mr. Burlane," she called. "I hope you won't mind?"

"Give him — a pound," Ed called back cheerfully.

"What do you say 'bout stayin'?" Peters reminded from within, as he thumped his chair about into a new position of ease.

"I 'll stay 's long 's you want me," Ed said. "I 've got no plans or projects ahead; jus' riding for a job an' to see th' country hereaway."

"All right," Peters said heartily. "We 'll look things over in th' morning an' see what 's needed. May have to ride in to Coppered Jack to get some wire an' staples. Probably hitch up th' buckboard to drag the stuff out on. That suit you?"

"Sure, Old Timer."

The girl had finished feeding the stallion. As

she left him he strained his neck out after her and whickered again.

"Oh, you old flatterer," she chided, turning and spatting his muzzle with the flat of her hand.

Midnight whickered again. The girl laughed and strolled toward the house, singing, as she came:

> Oh, the Chisholm Trail is a long, long road,
> But when I ride it I don't pack no load,
> For it leads to one that I love best,
> And the trail's far end spells rest, pard, rest.

"How long you goin' to stay, Mr. Burlane?" she asked, as she neared the door.

"Till you folks take a club an' chase me over the hills to th' next range," he laughed. Her fresh, free laughter duetted with his own, and the deep booming of the old man's made it a trio. Midnight, from the corral bars, added his chest-deep whicker to the three, and then it was a quartet of good will and agreement.

CHAPTER III

CHIPS FROM OLD BLOCKS

AFTER the conference in the saloon, the Barnquists, father and son, went to the wagon yard of Coppered Jack, the place where all sorts and conditions of men put out their horses. Weaver and Maltrane followed, retainer-like, at a respectful distance.

The two Barnquists, followed by the others, were soon mounted and riding toward their ranch, the Ox Bow, so called because their brand was shaped like an oxbow. The Barnquist ranch house was one of the finest in the Southwest, rambling over an ample space, and enclosing a "gallery" in the center. It was white painted, with many airy, large windows. The bunkhouses were ample and clean; and the best of bedding, food and everything to work with was furnished the Barnquist ranch hands and hangers-on. Barnquist was known not to haggle over wages, if he could get done those things he wanted done and without question. Be it known, however, that often very fine range riders, broncho busters

and wranglers refused to work for him. The Ox Bow clan were surly, offish, mean.

Barnquist was a widower. He had a crew of subservient Mexicans about the house who kept some sort of order, under the captaincy of a big, half-breed Papago who had been brought up on the place. She had been separated from her own tribe ever since Barney Barnquist's mother had died, and had looked after the boy, first as nurse, then as preceptor in all sorts of ranch-life escapades. This woman, Greasewood Kate, dressed as a white woman but had the heavy face, sturdy body and quick actions of the Papago squaw. As Barney had grown in bulk and years he had escaped from her tutelage; but she had taken charge of the household and in some rough-and-ready way managed to govern the other servants. She was known to be honest and decent, and Bart Barnquist heeded her somewhat and trusted her.

A little way out of Coppered Jack father and son passed a group of Mexicans working on the irrigation ditch. They greeted their employer cordially, and Barnquist threw a handful of cigarettes to them, for which they scrambled.

The hulking ranch owner laughed to see them scrabble thus for his meanly bestowed bounty. He spurred his horse, a magnificent roan, powerful and well boned, and Barney rode silently at his side for a while. Suddenly the elder man turned to the son.

"I suppose you sometimes wonder, pup, what I 'm sinking all that money in that ditch for? Especially 's I don't give you much cash money?" he asked.

"Yes, but I knew 't would do me no good to ask," Barney answered sulkily, twitching meanly at the bridle of his rather poor-shaped pinto.

"You bet it would n't, pup, till I got good and ready to tell. Now listen. You showed headwork in planning that job on Nicked-Nose Peters to-day and in stopping Weaver from plugging th' stranger in th' open an' f'om behind, like. You seem to be raisin' a few brains under your wide-brim. About time, too. Now listen to me:

"I c'n see what others can't in th' range country. We big cattle men have got to buy land, or peel down to smaller holdin's and raise better steers, feed them on roughage we raise. The days of free range are going to end, pup. Not right away, but before your time is full. I 'm going to grab off what water my ditch will bring me down and be ready. It 'll pay for itself in water sold to the Little Soda Lake teams and teamers, if we c'n get shet o' Peters, who has those twin springs and c'n sell or give water away and keep me from chargin' what I like. You 'll see th' day, pup, when them irrigation works of mine 'll be wo'th a heap."

"I admire your headpiece, pap," Barney said with a show of warmth. "And now 't you 've seen my head 's on straight, let me in on some of your schemes and treat me less like a kid, will you?"

The father turned and looked at the son with an expression of contempt on his florid countenance.

"You got fine hosses, good clothes, good guns, for th' askin', pup. I give you a certain amount o' coin — "

"Yes, pap, but you treat me like a kid. I c'n ride better 'n most o' your range riders; shoot like hell-fire — but no one knows it; I practiced secret, like you said. Say, dad," with a sudden burst of confidence, "gimme a few hundred dollars, to spend jus' as I want, eh? I sure want to — "

The father glanced back. The two retainers were a safe distance behind, their horses keeping pace with the two leaders' horses.

"You quit whinin' like that, pup," Barnquist sneered; "when I 'm gone, you 'll handle the money and be boss, but till then you take what things I pass out to you; hear, pup?" His tone became menacing, heavy.

The young man flashed a glance of resentment at the father, who laughed.

"I like to see you look like that, pup. You look jus' like a Barnquist: black-browed, scowling. No, pup; when you show you 're a man,

hard, able to handle it, you 'll get plenty of money."

"I 'll show you — some day, pap," the young man growled, his face drawing into a meaner scowl still. "I want money, real money, like other folks has, *cash* money, not credit at what onery stores is in Coppered Jack, and bar credit and tobacco money. I want *cash* money — "

"To spend on some of those Mexican gals in town, eh? Or to buy some geegaw to make it solid with that calico-skirted, half-shod filly out to Twin Springs, eh? Why n't you *take* what you want in calico, eh, pup?"

He guffawed heavily, a flare of deeper passion marking his face that had become almost purple with the force of his argument.

"Pap," and the son's voice grated roughly over the soft thudding of the hooves of the loping horses on the trail, "I 'm goin' to have money — plenty of money, *cash* money. I 'm goin' to handle it myself, pap, mind that!"

"You get it — ef you c'n, pup, but not off'n me — *yet.*"

He cut his horse sharply with his quirt and drove the spurs into its flanks. The animal bucked, and he smashed it with the quirt's butt and gripped it with his huge knees, roaring with laughter as his spurs tore its haunches to ribbons. Barney watched this exhibition with sullen face. In a few moments the horse was reduced to a

quivering, abject condition. Barnquist forced the animal back on to the trail again and jeered.

"There, son, is what 'll happen to you, if you buck-jump on me an' try to get hold of any *cash* money but what I give you. I 'll ride you and spur you an' make you a sight for the hull range. But go as I want you to, and when I feel a good ready, you 'll have plenty of *cash* money to spend."

He let up on the cruel bit and relaxed his knees. The horse groaned with relief. In a moment he had the animal loping again toward home.

Barney, a bit behind, ceased not to scowl at his father's back and refused several invitations to draw up beside him. Maltrane and Weaver, quite a distance behind, had not been direct witnesses of this little scene and had overheard nothing of the heated conversation between the two.

Leaving the main trail, the four went loping up to the Barnquist ranch. Father and son tossed the reins of their horses to Weaver and Maltrane and went toward the house. The son clung determinedly to the heels of the father and followed him into the doorway of a room on the corner of the house, — a large "office", where Barnquist kept his few account books and had a homemade desk and chairs. Barney slammed the door behind him as they entered.

His father wheeled on the young fellow when they were inside.

"Well, what 're you naggin' along back of me like that for, pup? Did n't I tell you what there was to it?"

"You had your say, pap," his face mottled with anger; "an' I 've had mine. Now, gimme some cash money. I want — a lot."

"A lot, eh," spraddling out his legs and putting his big hands under the back of his coat. "You 're not a-girlin' it, are you? You never showed no spunk like that before."

"Never you mind, pap. I want cash money, *now!*"

His jaw was set, his fists doubled.

Like lightning the father struck — once. The son, caught fair, crumpled. Barnquist stooped, flicked the gun from the son's holster and threw it in the corner. Barney staggered up, his hand to his jaw.

"You found who runs this ranch then, pup!" Barnquist growled; "go pick up your fool gun — and git out."

For a moment the son seemed about to renew the fight. Then a look of submission spread over his face and he took his hand from his jaw and came forward. He put out his hand and took that of his father, who tried to avoid the clasp.

"I say, pap," he whined; "don't hit me like

that, pap. I 'll quit askin' for cash money and go on credit, like I have."

He dropped the niggard hand of his father, stooped, got his gun, holstered it smoothly and went out. As he went, his father sneered.

"Huh, I thought you 'd hit back — *once,* pup. I 'm about sure you 're not wo'th raising; such a pulin', no-'count, meek lam' as you are. Go in a corner an' chaw a bone."

The door slammed. Barnquist sat down and laughed amusedly.

But outside the door the son, his face convulsed with hate, was standing, one clenched fist raised, the other hand gripped about his gun's butt. He wheeled and collided with a heavy form in the passageway that led from the outer entrance to the ranch house's interior, — the one leading from office to living rooms. It was Greasewood Kate, Ox Bow's breed house manager. Barney gasped, then relaxed.

"Why, Bar*nee,* you havin' another fight weeth heem?"

"Yes, Kate. And sure as you 're a half Papago, I 'll fight back, some day — "

Her broad, firm hand went over his mouth. She drew him down the little side corridor.

"Careful, Bar*nee!* He is master of Ox Bow yet."

"But won't *all*-ways be, Kate. And when I 'm master — "

"You will marry my girl, like you have promised?"

"Yes, Kate; but don't nag me on that, doggone it. Time enough to talk about that — later."

"Yes, time enough — if you talk right, Bar*nee!* But you 'member a Papago squaw's girl is not a Mexican flirt, to be put off with a present."

"Draw in on your loop, Kate," squirming past her and bursting into the room at the end of the passage.

The half-breed woman was silent as she followed him. She seemed about to renew the conversation, when the door at the farther end of the room opened, and a girl of perhaps fifteen entered shyly. Her face brightened as she saw the half-breed. She was dressed in a simple white dress, with a pink ribbon in her black hair that was down her back in a thick, glossy braid. Her eyes were dark, slumberous, liquid; her lips and cheeks full, crimsoned with health and not coarsely rich. She was already a woman in form, rounded, in the full tide of young life.

"Hello, Bar*nee,*" her voice came full, deep, like that of the woman. "Ai 'm glad you come."

She came to him with a gliding, easy grace, reaching her hands out to him.

Barney took her hands, drew her to him carelessly, gave her a passing kiss and brushed by her

with scarcely a word. He went out of the door by which she had entered and left her with her mother.

As the door slammed behind the young rancher, the girl turned to Greasewood Kate with eyes that blazed.

" He — he kiss no more same as he did. He 's — a not goin' love me some more."

" You are a fool, Ess-Way," her mother said, but she drew the girl to her for a moment and patted her glossy braid. " Bar*nee*, he 's had anoth' fight weeth hees pap. He 'll be back. You must not mind, Ess-Way. He promise me again he marry you when he 's — a boss on Ox Bow."

The girl straightened her shoulders and drew away from her mother, saying:

" He 's — a goin' marry me, yes! We 're white and Mex, yes. But we 're Indian, too. Let Bar*nee* keep that to his mind."

She turned and went down the passage toward the out-of-doors. Her mother glanced through a side window and smiled to see her, a moment later, mounted astride, galloping off on a horse, riding it without saddle and with only a twitch-rope about its lower jaw, Indian fashion.

" She said right; we are Papago," the mother thought as she saw the girl go out of sight over the nearest roll of the open prairie.

CHAPTER IV

WHY BARNEY WANTED CASH MONEY!

AFTER supper Barney Barnquist, his face smoothed out, a smile of bluff good will on his lips, lounged out toward the bunkhouse. He called to Maltrane who, with several other hard-faced men, was lounging before the building:

"Hey, Mal, get out my fancy saddle an' lil brown mare?"

"Sure, boss," Lars Maltrane responded quickly. While he went for the saddle and to the corral for the mare, Barney joked with the men. He carried himself with a bluff assurance that seemed to take well with them, and most of them seemed anxious to please the young cattle prince.

Soon he was in the saddle, riding away toward the main trail. Instead of turning toward Coppered Jack, however, he turned southeast.

"Off to Mescalero Pedro's again," laughed Maltrane. "Off to th' Chaparral Cock, eh?"

"Yes, an' Pedro 's got a new gal there that 's a-stringin' him along, or my name 's not Weaver," the sputtery, slim little man joked.

There were many sly laughs and nudges.

"Half th' Mexicans — the men — are wild over the new woman Pedro 's brought up from Las Alamos to tend bar, an' half th' women here are jealous a'ready," Maltrane said.

Barnquist put his sturdy little mare to a brisk lope. She thudded the miles behind her. A full moon was coming later; now the open country was in the soft sunset afterglow. After a while the trail dipped into a draw, and at the mouth of it, on a little rise of ground, was a squatty, sprawling building, with outbuildings grouped about it, — a typical roadside drinking place of the old Southwest. There was no reason why it should have been in just that place. It might have been in a hundred thousand others, just as accessible or inaccessible. But there it was, a place to drink in, to lounge in, to swap lies in. And off behind, far down the draw, were hackberries and a spring under the fairly steep slope.

Barnquist found a few Mexicans dicing it; a cowpuncher or two drinking. Trade was dull, the woman leaning over the bar languidly. Barney swaggered in, after standing his well-broken mare at the tie-rail.

"'Lo, Maretta," he gave the dark-eyed woman; "gimme a — a shot o' pulque."

The woman smiled, reached down bottle and glass, and spun them toward him. He tossed off a drink, threw a coin down.

She twisted a brown cigarette and held it up for him, after lighting it between her own lips. He giggled, put out a clumsy hand in a rough, callow attempt at an endearment. She drew back and laughed. She went to the other end of the counter to wait on a cowpuncher who called for a whisky. She lingered, listening to his compliments, while Barnquist glowered. She fluttered back to Barney soon, lips pouting.

"Ah, Maretta," he pleaded, "talk to me — honest, I 'm wild over you."

She laughed and went to answer another call. Barney went to a chair and sat down heavily.

The woman, over the shoulder of the new customer, shot Barney a glance of encouragement. He glowered, pretending to be miffed. But when the customer went, he stalked to the bar, bought another drink of something, — he did not notice what.

They had the bar to themselves. She toyed with the young fellow as a cat toys with a mouse, pouting, advancing, retreating, now taking a puff from his cigarette, now lightly boxing his ears as he whispered some heavy bit of persiflage into the ear that she kept tiptilted toward him.

There came the beat of hooves at the door, a quick command in Spanish. Spurs jangled; bells on a man's big hat tinkled. In through the door, lithe, agile, a Mexican strode. He paused a moment, hand in the folds of his sash, his dark,

handsome face attentive, his cigarette curling its wisp of smoke about his features. The woman at the bar shot him a phrase:

"Ho, Pedro, come here. Come, Señor Aguilar, come."

"*Si,* Señorita," and he came easily, gracefully. hands on swaying hips. The woman bade him listen, motioned for him to put his head to theirs.

The three heads, the American's, the two Mexicans', drew together over the bar. Barney's voice sank to a whisper:

"Honest, now, Pedro, tell her I 'm good for any money — "

"Maretta," with an air of candor, in low, wheedling voice, "what thees-a Señor says is-a true. He is Barnquist, laik hee 's sayin'."

"There, did n't I tell you?" Barnquist said, elated, louder.

"Well, then, eef you be Barnquist, how-a you soo stingee? You buy da dreenk, yes. But avra cowpuncher, hee 's got roll *cash* monee."

"Honest, now, Maretta, honest, I 'll get a roll, like I said. We 'll blow outa here, eh; down to Vernon, eh; have a go of it? I 'll get a roll, a big, big roll — "

She puffed disdainfully at a cigarette that she rolled deftly.

"Maybe," she said quietly; "maybe. Now you run away off, kid, an' grow to be a man before you-a come teasin' 'round me."

Barney drew back, his face working with rage, baffled passions struggling for the mastery. He cursed, spat, turned and tramped out. As he went, he heard the woman's laughter floating after him. He glanced back. Pedro was kissing the girl over the bar. A moment later the rattle of hooves told of the young man's departure.

"Well played, my Maretta," Pedro complimented her in Spanish, starting back and beginning to laugh. "If we can get the young Señor Barnquist to free himself of his father's hand, he will come here, spend his money like water! Play him, then, Maretta, well and hard. Once he is in our grip, it shall go well with us. His father is too good a business man to let his men hang about our place. We get only the passing trade, eh? But once the young Barnquist is his own master, he will come and bring others after himself. When he is sole heir to the Barnquist money, if you keep him in leading strings by pretty by-plays, we will soon both be rich, my *dulce* señorita."

The little brown mare was quivering with pain and weak from hard usage when Barney Barnquist spun her up from the main trail and into the ranch yard. He swung off before the bunkhouses and stood still a moment after he had alighted. There was a light streaming from a door far down the line of outbuildings. The

tinkle of a mandolin came to him. Barnquist smiled to hear it.

"Monte Joe 's got 'em all together, playing those fool songs of hisn," Barney said to himself. He uncinched the saddle, yanked the bridle off, whacked the little mare in the corral. He went into the saddlery room and flung the gear on to a peg, then came out softly. He went along the bunkhouse until he came to a window. He stood alert, lighted a cigarette and leaned against the window casing, apparently idling. The mandolin tinkled; lights twinkled in the big house; a horse off in the home corral neighed.

Barney's arm stole inside the open window. His hand fumbled about in the gloom inside and found a thimble-belt that hung there. It came back. He opened it, and in the palm, as he made his cigarette glow to show it, was a .38 cartridge.

"You 'll never miss that, Weaver, and it 'll do me a power o' good," he told himself. Then he went slowly to the door whence the mandolin was tinkling, looked in, joked and said to Weaver:

"I 'm just in; thought you fellows were enjoyin' yourse'ves, so I turned the mare into the corral myself."

He went away, whistling. Weaver thanked him. The mandolin tinkled.

Near the house a white form came from behind a bush. He paused a moment to chat with Ess-

Way, then brushed by her, leaving her to stand there, her arms out. He switched inside, along the corridor, past the "office", then upstairs. He undressed hurriedly, then tumbled into bed. Soon his deep breathing could have been heard by any one in the hallway outside. And was heard, for the half-breed woman came tiptoeing along, listened, then went down. Outside she found the girl, sobbing a little, leaning against the outer door jamb.

"Be quiet, Ess-Way," she urged; "he was only tired — went right up and to bed."

The girl drew herself up and flung away into the shadows. The mother sat on the doorstep and watched her go — then went indoors again. The girl soon followed, slyly, watchfully, and went upstairs like a mouse.

The ranch house stilled; the horses ceased to move about in the moon-white home corral. The mandolin tinkled. The elder Barnquist came loping in from some quest and had his horse taken care of. All was quiet.

Barney Barnquist got up softly and put match to lamp's wick. He sat on the floor, the lamp beside him, working over an outspread paper. First he took out the purloined .38-caliber cartridge and worked and worked at the nose of the ball until it came out. He wrapped the empty shell and powder grains in a wisp of paper and set them aside; he cut a nick in the nose of the

bullet and laid that aside. Then, getting his own gun, a .45, Colt's side-throw-out pattern, from its holster hanging at the bed's head, he worked a bullet from the end of one of its shells, taking the shell from his belt.

Barney was careful not to lose the powder from that .45 shell. Atop of the powder he placed a little wad, then he worked the .38-caliber bullet from the stolen shell on top, swaging it into place with bits of paper. He worked a false crimp in the end of the brass shell-case, to grip the smaller bullet in as well as it could be done. Finally he was satisfied that the added wad would hold in the powder; that the ball would not rattle from the paper wedges and false crimping. Then he took the rammer of his gun from its socket and threw the oval cover off the discharge chamber of the .45's cylinder, poked into the cylinder from the front end and forced one shell out. He slipped the faked shell into its place, snapped the oval throw-out cover over the chamber it was in, raised the trigger to halfcock, twirled the cylinder until the faked shell was the one just before the hammer; so that, when the gun was next cocked, the faked shell would move into place, ready to be discharged. He sighed with satisfaction that a man feels upon completing a nerve-tense job, let the gun's hammer down softly, holstered the gun at the bed's head and then softly opened a drawer in his rough box-

trunk in a corner of the room. He took out a fresh box of .45's, and opened them, abstracted six shells and placed them on the outspread paper. He got soap from the washstand, then a pencil. Sitting down, he proceeded to shave up the soap, then to knead it between his powerful fingers and thumbs. Soon he had it like putty. He split the pencil deftly with a penknife and got the lead out of it. He shredded the soft lead until it was powder,—black, soft. He kneaded that into the soap and soon had a lead-like, fairly hard mass.

Then Barney took the six shells and worked the bullet from each. He kept the powder in the shells and, wadding it tight with a little paper, proceeded to mold, on top of each shell, the semblance of a time-dulled .45 ball, from the lead-tinted soap. When he was satisfied, he had six apparently good .45's that were only blank cartridges in reality.

Smiling evilly, Barney took the six fake shells and wrapped them in a bit of paper. He pouched the discarded balls, the empty .38 shell, the residue of the leaded soap, and then he sat down on the bed's edge. Finally he got up, took them all up again and went to a corner of the room, wheeled the washstand aside as carefully as possible and, reaching behind it, thrust the little parcel into a cranny there. He rolled the washstand back, then, grinning, went to bed.

He intended to do away with the evidences of his manufacture of those fake shells later. But now he meant to sleep and soundly, for no one but himself knew of that hiding place, he thought to himself, congratulatory-wise, just before somnolence claimed him fully.

CHAPTER V

"WE GET PETERS — TO-DAY!"

"WANT to see you in th' front room," Barney's father said crisply as soon as the son had shown himself, smiling, easeful, about the ranch yard the next morning. He winked mysteriously.

Barney followed. In the office he found Weaver and Maltrane waiting. The elder Barnquist locked the door, and the four gathered about the rough desk.

"I 'm goin' on a hunch that Peters will be back in Coppered Jack," he informed them; "we 're goin' in to-day an' get Peters."

"He 'll be back, to swell around, after runnin' you off the street," Maltrane said, his cold eye glinting.

"Yes, I suspect so. I heard him saying earlier yesterday that he might be back to get fencin' an' staples to put up some wire he 's been braggin' about putting around his two springs."

"Le 's go over th' program again," Weaver suggested.

"You do it, Barney; you made up the scheme," Barnquist said flatteringly.

"It 's easy enough, but I 've thought of an amendment. Now, get it right: We get Peters inside, on the chance of a drink between him and I and pap. You two be in the back room. Weaver and you pop out together. Weaver fires. Mal, here, he has Peters covered. As Peters wheels, Mal, who never misses, plugs him, dead center, cold turkey. Weaver keeps pumping lead, each of his .38's nicked, and one of them goes in th' pile o' wet rags Barnum mops th' bar with. Dad lets off his gun once or twice. We swop guns, Weaver's for Peters'. When the crowd comes bulging in, pap 's just plump had to shoot Peters, because the onery cuss picked a fight after we made up, an' the nicked-nose balls from Weaver's gun proves that he did n't shoot straight, because pap plugged him first and he shot his wad wild, all over th' room. Now for my improvement. When th' break comes, to make sure, I 'll grab Peters' gun-arm — "

"You would n't have th' guts."

His father's voice came sneering across the boards at him.

"Now, don't nag, pop. You watch an' see."

"You pull that, pup, now hear me talkin', an' I 'll give you some real cash money to spend — as much as — five dollars. Haw! Haw!"

Barney hung his head in humiliation at being

thus bantered before even the hirelings. He noted their scornful smiles. His mouth grew hard. He got up and flung out.

The three continued to talk in low tones, perfecting their plan. Barney, outside, went toward the bunkhouse. He strolled along, seemingly careless. At the doorway leading to Lars Maltrane's room he paused and glanced about. No one was watching. He went in quickly and found Mal's holster on its peg. It was there because at home there would be no need for the gun's use, as a rule. The young man drew out the gun from the holster. It was a new model. He put the throw-out open, flicked out the six good .45's. He fed the faked ones, that he got out of his pocket, where he had been carrying them, carefully wrapped, into the weapon, then carefully closed the throw-out again. He put the gun into its holster, fumbled until he found a match in one of Maltrane's coat pockets and came out, ostentatiously lighting the cigarette he got out with the match, so, if seen, it would be thought he merely had strolled inside to get a match. Then he went quietly toward the office again.

He came in, to find the three at ease, the door open, as if plots and plotting were farthest from their minds.

"You 're just in time, pup," the elder Barnquist growled; "le 's go, boys; le 's go and get Peters to-day. My hunch is that he 'll be in."

The four clumped out. Soon they were mounted and galloping toward the main trail. As they flashed past the ranch house a white form leaned from the window of Barney's room, fluttering a good-by with a dust-rag.

"That lil Injun gal's a-dustin' your room, pup," Barnquist leered. "You ought to have pleasant dreams if she hangs around your room, like that."

Barney only scowled. He was moody all the way in.

At the wagon yard Barnquist's query yielded results; Peters, the yard man said, was in, — with his buckboard.

"What'd I tell you?" the elder Barnquist said aside, to the three; "le's go get him."

They went out on to the street. Few people were about. The day was young. A Mexican dog or two skulked about between the houses, sniffing for bones. A burro off somewhere in the spaces back of the row of buildings brayed. The sun, brilliant, beamed down. Two men crossed the street farther up, close to the Thimble Belt saloon of Parley Brown.

"One o' those is Nicked-Nose Peters," Lars Maltrane said.

"And the other?" Barney Barnquist asked.

"Seems familiar," Weaver champed on his pipe stem, emitting a blurb of smoke.

"It's that cussed range rider from Vernon

that threw his gun down on to me yest'day," Barney's father growled.

Just then they saw the range rider start back from the saloon toward the Coppered Jack Emporium.

"He 's goin' back to th' store for somethin', an' that lets us get to Peters when he 's alone," urged Barney. "Come on!"

He started forward.

"Cussed if th' pup is n't gettin' brave," his father sneered, tailing after his eager son. The other two strode after their master toward Peters, who, in front of the saloon, was whistling:

> It 's a long lope to Chihuahua,
> But a longer one to Yuba Dam. . . .

As they came up, he saw them at a distance and dropped his hand to pistol butt, as if casually. Men who saw their attitudes edged back into doorways or between buildings, expectant of dazzling gun-play.

"We come to make it up, Peters," Barnquist called, now in the lead. "Come on in an' have a hoot in Parley Brown's joint; what say?"

The watchers' faces showed their disappointment over the outcome. The four moved. They were all smiling, faces bland. Peters' hand came from his gun's butt. The smile of a good-natured, if sometimes hasty, man overspread his face.

"You mean you 're not lookin' for trouble?" he asked.

"Sure," and Barnquist stuck out his fist, friendly, invitingly.

"Well, I 'll call it off, then," and Peters met his clasp. "We gotta live neighbors, like, Barnquist. I don't want no trouble. You got your plans 'bout that irrigation ditch an' th' water. I won't cross them. All I want is to be let alone on my little holdin's, with my gal, Ber'nice."

"That 's a' right, Peters," warmly. "Say, le 's all go into th' joint and hoot one together, eh."

"All right, Barnquist," and Peters glanced over toward the Emporium. "I gotta watch for a friend o' mine. He 'll be out in a minute."

"Come on in an' have a hoot now. When he comes we c'n have another," young Barney urged.

Peters wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He glanced at the Emporium again. No Burlane was appearing.

"Jus' a hoot together, to show we 're all friends," urged Barnquist, bluff, hearty.

"All right, le 's make it a good one," and Peters turned, at Barnquist's side. They stepped through the open portal. The other three closed in after the two older men, who were chatting, friendly-wise. Barnquist called ahead:

"Five o' th' best, Barnum, lively, now." Presently the Emporium's door opened. Burlane

came out and gazed toward where he had left his new-found friend. He came across the street and glanced up, then down.

"Seen Peters?" he asked of a man leaning against a near-by doorway.

"Just went in there," he answered, pointing to the saloon's open portal. "With th' two Barnquists an' Mal an' Weaver."

Ed turned to enter. His face was clouded with anxiety. He could hear Peters' voice; noisy protestations of friendship that to Ed's ears had the ring of insincerity in them. He swung the door, when the man to whom he had spoken called:

"Hey, Mister, th' Emporium's clerk's yellin' at you."

Ed turned back. The clerk met him halfway and corrected an error in change that Ed had not noticed. Thanking the clerk, Burlane turned toward the saloon's door again.

As he did so he heard *the sharp crack of a* .38.

Plunging forward, hand on gun-butt, Ed hurtled into the midst of dim, swirling chaos, blent with flashes of flame.

This is what Ed Burlane saw:

The head of Barnum, just emerging from behind the bar, back of which he evidently had been crouching during the battle. Parley Brown, in a far corner, moaned, his head laid open from the impact of some hard object. Against the side

wall was Barney Barnquist, hands and arms folded, smoke eddying about him, his face sardonic, his eyes fixed upon something crumpled in the far corner. Behind the partition leading to the next room a hurricane of human wrath was venting itself. Ed plunged in there, guns ready. As he sped he had a vision of a gun on the floor before the bar, but he disregarded that.

He flung himself into the writhing mass on the floor — and found Peters on top. He bawled into his ear:

"Hell-a-mile, Peters, what is it? Let up; it 's Burlane."

Peters, panting, surged upright. The two men under him were groaning. The two empty guns of them were on the floor. The table, the chairs were broken, the room a general wreck.

Ed swung his guns to cover the prostrate ones as he edged Peters out into the main room that by now was filling up with a swirl of eagerly inquisitive men. And by now young Barnquist was at the side of the crumpled form on the floor. Weaver, his pipe missing, Maltrane, his hard eyes daunted from glaring at the ends of Ed's steady guns, came out, obeying orders from the range rider.

"Now, what is it all about?" Ed demanded, dominating the situation.

"I charge that man with killing my father, after my father had made up with him, publicly,

in full view of the town," Barney Barnquist said, pointing to Peters. "We came in here peacefully, to have a drink t' seal our new frien'ship. He turned on my father and shot him down. My two friends, Weaver and Maltrane, tried to overpower him — "

" Why n't they use th' guns that 's on th' floor inside, then? " Ed demanded.

" He was too quick — jumped 'em with fists."

" You bet I jumped them," Peters blared indiscreetly. " I hearn guns a-barkin' behind me, to my side. I reached for mine. It was gone; some skunk had twitched it out o' my belt at th' first crack. I jumped for th' shooters jus' as they emptied their weepons. I sailed into 'em with fists and feet and teeth and claws — "

" You lie, Peters. You shot my father and started that side row to cover it up," Barney was erect now, the picture of outraged young manhood.

Ed holstered his guns with twin snaps of supple wrists. He strode to the prostrate form and felt for the heart.

" He 's dead," he announced, and threw back the vest and shirt. The breast, so exposed, was not bloody. The bleeding had taken place internally.

He examined the bullet hole intently a second while the people held their breaths.

" That 's queer," and he felt in the vest pocket

and drew out a few cigarette papers in there. He examined them, pocketed them and stood erect.

"Nothing queer about it," Barney denounced. "Peters here killed my father. I accuse him—"

"You lie," Peters thundered.

"No; I saw you shoot him—"

"It is queer, then," Ed said distinctly, his hands dropped to his gun's butts again, "mighty queer that a charge from a good, tight .38 like Peters has should throw a bullet keyholed, end over end, instead of straight, rotating on its axis, as a well-sent ball should go from a good, tight .38 inside this short range, is n't it?"

Barney scowled, thrusting his face forward, bending across his father's body to do it.

"What are you saying?" he demanded.

"Just this, Barnquist." Ed pointed to the breast of the dead. "See where the ball went in, tearing an oblong hole, not making a nice, round, drilled one? I 've got cigarette papers that I 've taken from this dead man's upper left-hand vest pocket, and they are in the line of the ball's flight. They, too, are cut, *not pierced, with a round hole, but cut, keyhole, like.*"

The people stared at the bared breast of the dead; at the tense faces of the two living that accused and denied in turn.

"I 'll stay in town till Sheriff Harvison comes, Young Timer," Peters broke the tension. "You needn' ta be 'fraid for me. I got friends here, a

few. I 'll train with them. You ride out home an' tell th' gal what 's up."

Ed got up and wrung Peters' hand.

"I 'm with you, all the way through on this, Old Timer," he said warmly. "We 'll go down the trail with this, and we 'll *go clean through!*"

CHAPTER VI

COLD GUNS — AND HOT

As Ed dropped Peters' hand he thought of something. He brushed through the increasing crowd in the barroom and sought for the gun he had seen on the floor as he had leaped into the rear room to get at the center of the human whirlwind. He found it, kicked into a corner by careless feet. He grabbed it, then snapped behind the partition to pick up the two empty weapons on the floor there. He brought them out. His acts had been followed closely by several pairs of keen eyes, as Ed wished them to be. He laid the three guns down on the bar and called:

"Hey, Peters, one o' these is yours. Which is it?"

"That one," and Peters' stubby forefinger indicated his own gun.

Burlane felt of it, then passed it over to an open-faced, good-humored-seeming Coppered Jack man.

"I call on you, neighbor," he said, "to see that this weapon's cold — fully loaded — "

"Hold on, there," the Coppered Jackian objected. "It 's cold, but there 's one shell ex-

ploded," spinning the cylinder so he could make sure.

"Yas, one 's exploded. I killed a henhawk out to my place this morning w'en I was down to get the hosses to hitch to th' buckboard. You heard me shoot, Burlane."

"Yes, I heard you shoot — "

"Why n't you put out th' spent shell an' a new one in, then? " objected young Barnquist, striding over to the bar.

"That 's it; why not? " several of the Coppered Jack storekeepers demanded. The Barnquist money and influence was making itself felt.

"I was in a hurry — an' I was n't countin' on no rookus in town," Peters replied. "Leavin' my gun so, careless-like, shows I was n't after war."

"An' ef you was, Nicked-Nose," the man who had the gun said heartily, "you 'd on'y needed one shot. I don't believe Peters shot Barnquist."

"Thanks, Wickson," Peters said slowly.

"You don't horn in on this, Wickson," Barney Barnquist scowled at the new protagonist of the accused. "There 's still a Barnquist alive — "

"You 'll chaw a lot o' beef before you 're as hefty as your dad," Wickson flashed back.

There was a hum of talk at this thrust. Young Barney's cringing demeanor toward his father was well known. He felt that he had not

proved himself yet, and that something was needed to set him up in the eyes of the hard-bitten men with whom he had to deal and over whom he meant to reign, as his father had. The huddled heap in the corner already was passing from his cunning, ambition-spurred mind. There never had been affection between father and son, and the fact that his father was dead did not grieve him enough to overshadow the possibilities of his new position.

"Now, these two guns," Burlane cut in with, shoving the .38 and .45 along the bar to Wickson, who picked them up, after passing Peters' gun to another man. "Look at and feel of these two. Each of them is hot — mighty hot. All empty?"

"Yes, hot, empty," Wickson began, screwing one brown eye at the end of each cylinder in turn, as he twirled them, hammers half up. "And a dirtier gun I never saw than this," holding up the .45.

"Smeared with something, all in between chamber and barrel butt, and blacker 'n a Bay skunk," his neighbor informed the highly interested crowd.

"This is yourn, Lars Maltrane?" Wickson demanded.

"Yes," and Maltrane stepped forward, "it 's mine an' poorer shootin' I never done. When Peters began to pump at th' boss, I opened on him, an' I fired six times an' never hit a thing."

"That 's as fishy a story as ever was told, Mal," Peters bellowed, his fist going under the other's nose. "You, that 's 'counted th' best in this end o' San Felicé, firin' six times at me, short range, an' missin' ever' time! You tell that to some tenderfoot an' hear him laugh."

"Then there 's that other hot gun," Burlane suggested.

"Weaver's," Peters declared. "We ordered our guns, mail order, same day. They cum together."

"Yes; I shot my wad, too, before Peters came in to us," Weaver admitted.

"Another good shot fires six times at me, close range — an' misses six times — "

Peters glared at them, at the crowd. Men began to take sides, to whisper, pro and con. Burlane strode over to where the dead man was and bent over, to come up with Barnquist's gun.

"Dead cold," he informed them. He laid that gun, too, on the bar, where several verified his words by feeling of the weapon of the deceased cattle baron.

"Barkeep," Burlane demanded of Barnum, "where 's your gun? "

Barnum reached under the bar, got it and slid it along to join the others.

"Dead cold, all loaded," Burlane judged, feeling of the gun. He glanced about, seeking for some one else. Then he called:

"Where 's th' joint's boss; what 's his name?"

"Brown, Parley Brown," and the saloon's proprietor came to the center of the crowd.

"Oh, yes; you 're the man I saw on th' floor, like you 'd been knocked out, as I came belchin' in?" Burlane inquired.

"Yes; he 's that same man," Peters said. "He got in my way when I started with bare hands toward those two in th' other room that were shootin' to'rd me when I turned at th' first crack out o' th' box. He got in my way. I give him one lick — jus' one."

"Never mind that," Ed said shortly. "Le 's see your gun, too, Mr. Gin Seller."

"Yes, show it," several in the crowd commanded.

Brown unholstered his gun and laid it with the others.

"Cold, all chambers full; not been shot since last cleaned," Ed decided. The weapon, a new, bright one, showed for itself, at a glance, what Burlane had stated.

"Now," Burlane called, "where 's your gun, Barnquist?"

He glanced about, as did several others. Barnquist was not at the bar. In the shifting back and forth of people, looking at the guns and the actors in the drama called to the center of the stage, he had disappeared.

"Hey, Barney; Barnquist — "

It was Lars Maltrane.

"Here I am," and the young heir to Ox Bow came in from the street. "What 's wanted o' me?"

"Le 's see your gun," Burlane demanded. "Put it right on th' bar where all Coppered Jack c'n see it."

"Oh, yes," and he unholstered it and laid it down. "I did n't think you 'd want my gun. But here it is. A .45, side-throw-out. Pap was killed with a .38."

"How do you know?" Burlane cut in like a flash.

"Why, th' hole in him —"

"It takes a mighty good eye to tell th' difference between a .38 hole and a .45 hole in a man's skin —"

"Oh, no; a .45 is bigger, ever' way — tears a bigger hole —"

"Not when th' bullet keyholes; a .38 would tear a bad hole thataway."

Burlane snapped up Barnquist's gun.

"Warm, not hot," he said quietly; "all chambers full. Looks clean — but it 's about as warm as it would be after ten minutes, mebbe, an' after one chamber had been fired."

"Yes; it 's warm. I half drew it when you came in, guns bulgin', an' have had my hand on th' butt, finger on trigger, thumb over hammer, most o' th' time since, after you turned your back

an' began to argufy 'bout this affair. That nacherally would warm up th' gun some."

"Yes, *some,*" Ed agreed.

"An' what 'd I want to shoot my pap for — "

"No one 's said you did — *yet!*"

Burlane's face was thrust out; his jaw set. His eyes met those of the new cattle princeling.

"An' for a man that 's just lost a good dad, you 're displayin' mighty little interest in his remains," Ed finished.

"You talk like a lawyer," Barney replied steadily, glancing about with an injured air. "We Barnquists don't sputter about family affection a whole lot. Pap, he 's dead; I 'm interested now in gettin' his killer hanged higher 'n Haman."

This was a clever shot; an explanation of his conduct that Coppered Jack would understand. Many men murmured approval. Hearing this, Barney next did just the right thing from his standpoint; he walked to the corpse and bent over it with a show of rough affection.

"Help me to lay him out, boys," he pleaded. "When I went outside it was to send a rider on a hell-bent lope to Harvison, the sheriff. He ought to make it — and back — by sundown. Help me to get pap off'n th' floor an' on to th' bar, so 't the sheriff and coroner can view him."

Burlane and Peters were among those who helped. The truce was tacitly accepted as being

in operation, pending the arrival of Harvison and the coroner. So many volunteered that young Barnquist did not even touch the body in the ordered confusion of the ministry of pity. He stood back and, sighing, said in low tones, but so that several heard him:

"Poor pap!"

Then, shaking his head, he went into a corner, where, at a word, Weaver got him a chair from the wrecked rear room. He sat down heavily, the picture of filial grief.

In a few minutes Peters went over to him and extended his hand.

"You, here, Barney," he began, "I don't know who or what kilt your pop. Him an' me had our ha'sh words. We made up an' came in here for our drink together, you along, too. I did n't kill your pop. Le 's not have any bad blood—"

"You git away from me," Barney snarled, pushing aside the proffered hand. "You shot him, cold turkey. How Mal an' Weaver cum to miss you, I don't know. You git away. If they 'd killed you after you shot first, 't would 'a been plump justifiable, an' you know it. You git away!"

Peters drew back. He turned to the crowd.

"I 'm on th' limits, boys," he said; "I won't quit town till this is cleared up. You know me an' my word 's good. Runnin' away would be th' foolest thing I c'd do, anyways. My gun 's in evidence,

on th' bar. I 'll stick right 'round here till Harvison and th' coroner comes."

"An' I 'll ride out to your place at Twin Springs," Ed Burlane announced, " and break th' news to Berenice."

" You do that, Young Timer. Tell her to do th' best she c'n till I 'm able to be with her again."

Burlane shook Peters' hand again and went out. After he had gone, Barney Barnquist continued to sit, moody, stolid, chair tipped against the side wall of the saloon. The crowd eddied about, gossiped, thinned, thickened, drank over the upper end of the bar, farthest from the body. Flies buzzed.

Wickson spoke up:

" Peters, you come with us; we 'll be responsible for you. You can eat and if needed put up at my house to-night."

" Thanks, Wick. I 'll go you; I 'll stay inside th' town limits an' meet all comers on this."

They linked arms and went out. A half-dozen grim, gaunt old men followed. The younger element, glimpsing the far-off benefits from the new heir's opening reign, remained to offer encouragement and sympathy to Barnquist, who received both with just the right degree of interest and rather bored affability to catch the public regard, adding a subtle touch of manly sorrow.

CHAPTER VII

MIDNIGHT DOES N'T OBJECT!

A CURIOUS counter-play of feelings fought in Ed Burlane's breast as he shook out the horses hitched to the buckboard on his way back to Twin Springs. Ed felt that there was a mystery in the killing that might take much investigation to penetrate. He had seen too many guns discharged, too many men slain or wounded, shot too many guns himself, not to recognize that there was something sinister, imponderable, in the situation into which he had projected himself when he had catapulted into that smoke-wreathed, stressful barroom.

And at the end of his short buckboard trip was the girl, Berenice. He had to take to her the news that her father was charged with murder. He had been looking forward to a pleasant stay in Twin Springs, to possible bettering of friendship between them. Now he might be about Coppered Jack and Twin Springs for some time and would have to be just useful to her. The range rider's innate fineness of soul guided him in planning out what he would better do and say to her in the coming days. He must not use his

position to make love to her, with her father under a cloud, as that would put him in the position of using his position unworthily, he felt.

He came to the little house in a fine burst of speed from the buckboard ponies. Everything about the place seemed peaceful. A horse whickered from the corral bars. Ed noted that it was not Midnight, though.

"Darned old son-of-a-gun's hiding out, waiting for me to coax him to the bars with sugar," he mused, as he swung the harness off the ponies and turned them into the corral. He left the buckboard as it was.

He went toward the house, calling:

"Ho, Miss Peters; I say, Miss Peters."

There was no reply. He stepped into the main room, then into the kitchen. No one answered his hails. He went out the back door, became alarmed, raced about the house, to the corral. Here he called:

"Ho, Midnight."

There was no answering whicker. Burlane went into the corral. In the soft dirt that was trampled up near the bars he found the reason for the silence of stallion and girl. The prints of her small shoes were in the dirt, beside those of Midnight, whose heavier tracks stood out from the light ones of the Peters cayuses. Ed went into the gear room and saw that his own saddle was gone.

"Risky lil mite o' wholesomeness," he apostrophized the atmosphere. "She 's rid off Midnight. First time he ever let any one but me do it."

He smiled, mused for a moment, then a shade of anxiety swept over his face as he thought of what the big stallion might do out on the open prairie, under stress of temptation to frolic and play tricks on the girl rider. He was about to saddle one of the Peters horses and start out on her trail, when he heard the clatter of big hooves, and Midnight thrummed into view, snorting proudly. On his back was Berenice, laughing down at Ed, who glanced up at her with a frank smile of admiration.

"Slide down an' hear your sentence," he encouraged.

She laughed and swung down. Midnight came to Ed, nuzzled him, then was turned into the corral with a few quick motions. Burlane put away saddle and bridle and then went toward the house, where the girl had retreated while he was ungearing the stallion. He came into the main room of the sod house to find her looking at him in mock defiance.

"Honest, Mr. Burlane," she said, mischief in the corners of her mouth, "I thought I 'd take a gallop on him and be back, and you 'd never know. But where 's dad?"

"You 're lucky to be back whole," he said

rather shortly, for the thought that Midnight would carry, peacefully, any one but himself, rather nettled him. Then he remembered his errand; he pointed to a chair and with a grave face said:

"Sit down, please, Miss Peters, an' I 'll tell you where your dad is."

Her face went white at the intimation that her father was not at the house or about the place. She sank into the chair and waited for his explanation.

"The Barnquists got your father into the saloon in Coppered Jack — "

"Parley Brown's? "

"Yes, why? "

"He 's a Barnquist partisan."

"I understand! Yes, Miss Ber'nice, they got your dad in there, and there was a mix-up — your dad was in it — and Barnquist was killed."

"Was father hurt? Oh, take me to him," starting up eagerly.

"No, Miss Ber'nice, he was n't hurt bodily, but some one tried to assassinate his good name, to make him out a cold turkey killer — "

"Oh, dad never shot, unless in self-defense. He was never a killer, a mean, cold man."

"I don't need to be told that, Miss Ber'nice. But the charge is made; Barnquist is dead. I ain't mourning over that much. And that young Barnquist is cock of Ox Bow heap now — "

"*Him!*"

The brows of her went up; her stubbed-out, worn shoes swung under her chair seat in disdainful rhythm. Burlane smiled.

"And father?" she reminded him. "Is he jailed?"

"No; nothing is proved yet. He asked me to ride out and let you know how matters stood. I am to go back in town. Do you want to go along? Harvison 's been sent for. Ever'thin 's waitin' on his comin' t' Coppered Jack."

"I 'd better. We having spring water at the corral makes it so that everything on the farm can take care of itself when we are away. I can shut up here and go in. I can stay with Mrs. Wickson. They are old friends."

"Your dad got a heap of friends in town?" Burlane asked.

"Not a heap, perhaps, but what we have are mighty good folks."

This proudly and with a decided toss of her boyishly poised head.

"He may need 'em all before we 've played this through, soda to hoc," Ed said. "Now, do we fork a pair o' nags in or go in th' buckboard?"

"I think the buckboard would be better; but there 's Midnight —"

"Oh, he 'll stay where I put him. You 've got a good, tight, little home corral here, and the rascal has made friends with your hosses a'ready.

He 'll not be lonesome for a day or two till we get this straightened out."

She set about her few simple preparations for departure while Ed went out to harness the buckboard team again.

Midnight called to him over the corral bars, — a gentle, rumbling love-call. Ed sauntered over to him, batted him on the nose with the true horseman's mock-fury with his favorite mount. The stallion made play of nipping, pranced inside the fence, pleading for a scamper with Ed atop him. Ed heard the house door shut and turned to see Berenice coming down the path, a pink ribbon tie primly set under her square little chin, a pinky-white gingham dress, worn but clean and new pressed, receiving adornment from her own fresh charm, her wide-brimmed hat shoved back, her face flushed.

" Only for these here old stubbed-out shoes, I 'd feel dressed up," she laughed, embarrassed at his warm glance of admiration.

Remembering her position, however, Burlane swept his face clean of this, turning to Midnight for relief and batting playfully at his nipping mouth.

" Your dad got any eatin' — chawin' terbacker? " Ed asked.

" Yes, on the shelf behind the cookstove. Do you chew? "

Her face expressed some disapproval.

"No, but one of my family does," he said, chuckling inside.

He came back from his quest a moment later to find Midnight's head over the girl's shoulder. The horse was whickering deeply to her, and she was talking to him. Ed swept a wisp of the sweetened fine-cut under the horse's nostrils and drew it away. The horse left the girl and came to Ed.

"Like a man," she pouted; "to leave a girl for a chew of tobacco."

Midnight got the morsel he coveted, chewed and swallowed delightedly.

"Shucks!" Burlane laughed at her mock disapproval. "Old Midnight, he don't mean no bad manners. He craves terbac because it is bitter. Hosses like bitter stuff, like humans do. It's good for them."

He batted the stallion again, then turned to the business of harnessing the buckboard ponies. In a few moments they were ready. He handed her into the buckboard, leaped in himself. She took the reins, let them out to get the ponies into a harum-scarum lope, and they were off for Coppered Jack, the buckboard swaying and bumping over the rough road, Berenice laughing, Ed enjoying life.

He turned as they topped the rise toward the main trail that would take them out of sight of the sod house. He saw Midnight, at the corral

bars, gazing after them, and heard the stallion whicker.

"Darned old son-of-a-gun," he said aloud.

"Who?" she demanded, swirling the ponies around a hairpin turn, the buckboard on an acute tilt.

"That old cuss of a Midnight."

"Don't you call him names," she cautioned; "he 's a gentleman — and — "

Her face was filled with latent mischief.

"Well, finish it," he challenged.

"And you are another," she finished, her face sobering.

"Thanks. You 'll find it out for sure if the chance comes," he said with feeling. "I come of folks that believe that women are entitled to decent treatment, whether they are sisters, wives, mothers or — "

He paused.

"Finish it," she challenged in turn.

"Or sweethearts," he said quietly, taking the reins from her and bringing the ponies down into a steady pace.

It was just past mid-afternoon. The shadows grew longer and longer. A road runner raced ahead of them, then flirted out of the track. A mocker scolded as they passed a paloverde. Burlane found it pleasant to ride thus with her, — if only the cloud over her happiness did not threaten so blackly.

Not long after Ed and Berenice left Twin Springs, a rider came toward it from the opposite side, over the open swells. He rode easily, with the grace of the born horseman. His big hat's rim flapped gently; the bells on it tinkled; his brilliantly colored *serape* became him well. His smart dun mare neighed joyously as he patted her on the neck.

At the sound of the mare's call Midnight threw up his black head and snorted. The lesser lights in the Peters corral did not pay any attention. They were staid companions of man. In Midnight, young, virile, equine romance burned for utterance.

The rider reined in his horse when he was close to the house. Then he let the mare jog to the watering trough. He had all the appearance of a passer-by taking advantage of the chance of a drink for horse and man. He swung off-steed, drank heartily himself, fussed with the mare's cinch. Then he rolled a brown corn-husk cigarette and puffed it deeply.

Midnight called to the dun mare. She, jade-like, answered wantonly. Midnight called again, urgently.

The man tugged the mare forward, walking toward the house. He called:

"Ho, the house-a. Is-a Mees Peters a-home?"

There was no answer, of course. He called

again and again. Then he went to the door and knocked. He smiled craftily, when no one answered.

Midnight called again. The man led the prancing mare to the sod stable. Once behind it, he was out of the stallion's sight. He tied the mare securely to a tie-rack behind the structure and then began to reconnoiter. He first went to the house again and made sure no one was about; then came back to the corral bars. Midnight, viewing him, wheeled, screamed, kicked out with both deadly-earnest hind hooves.

"You-a dam-fine hoss." The Mexican smiled, a hand on each hip, his head tipped appraisingly. "You-a too dam-fine hoss for just-a cowman that he should be a-riding, yes."

Midnight kicked again and squealed.

"I 'm a-going-a clean oop you a clock," the Mexican said softly.

He went to the sod stable again and sought among Peters' gear. Presently he came out, an evil smile on his face. He had a big square of strong cloth — a cut-open cloth sack of close weave and a long piece of stout rope, into which he soon cast a running noose. The rope was far stronger than an ordinary lasso. It was at least half an inch in thickness, of finest Manila fiber. It was part of Peters' block-and-tackle rigging that he used for stretching fence sections about his tamed land. The Mexican measured the

rope with his eye; considered. He cut it in half, slip-noosed the other part, as he had the first, then sat down in the shade and smoked.

The sun westered. Every little while Midnight, snorting in the corral that abutted on to the sod stable, drew an answering neigh from the dun mare. They talked back and forth. The Mexican smiled and smoked. The shadows crept; clouds floated; a dim feathered kite soared overhead as a hawk quested for prey.

Presently, at the earliest edge of dusk, the Mexican got up easily. He led the mare to where Midnight could see her; placed her at the west end of the sod stable. She called. Midnight answered and racked down to the fence. While he was making noises at her and she beguiling him, the Mexican crept, like a weasel, to the east end of the stable, along its north side, and cast one of his big-rope loops on to the ground, just inside the fence near the wall. The other he laid, ready coiled, on the soil beside the stable's wall.

Then he got up and went to the place where the mare was coquetting with her admirer. He led her back along the stable, around the corner. She called again. The Mexican tied her so she could just peep around the end of the stable. Midnight pawed and snorted. The Mexican crept along the north wall, got the rope-end in his hands; waited, like an Indian.

Midnight made a few *pasears* in mid-corral and came back. He heard the mare again, answered her joyfully, and came racing to the fence, to be nearer yet. He was intent upon his temptress and did not see the snake-like form just where stable melted into the soil. Midnight whickered, pirouetting joyfully; the dun mare wheedled. He hesitated no longer. He came charging right toward the fence —

Something menacing coiled about his two fore-legs, as the Mexican sent a curl up the slack of the looped rope. The noose snapped tight about the horse's hocks. Midnight reared, fought, skinned his teeth. The Mexican snubbed the rope about a post and held on. The dun mare called, but her call went unheeded now, for the great stallion knew that he was in a trap, and all his wild nature surged to the top. He bit at the rope and squealed.

The Mexican, cool, safe, did not try to throw the stallion at first. He let him have rope, prance about, hobbling, his fore legs snugged. Then of a sudden he cast the other noosed rope through the bars of the fence, and Midnight *paseared* into the second trap. He felt his hind legs snared, struggled, leaned over and came to the ground.

The Mexican snubbed the second rope. He vaulted the fence, the big cloth in his hand. The stallion snapped at him, but the Mexican was cool.

"I 'm-a sure not hurt-a you, beeg horse," he said, speaking aloud in his cramped English, for the soothing effect it would have, he thought, on the animal; "the lasso, he 'd-a cut your-a neck. I want you weethout hurt, much."

He made a deft cast, — the cloth was over the horse's head. He twitched it tight, — knotted the ends. The stallion was blindfolded, helpless, for a horse becomes weak and terror-stricken when deprived of sight.

The Mexican got up, smiled, lighted another cigarette. The staid old Peters horses sniffed disdainfully as he rose, then went back to their grazing. The horse-thief went for Ed's bridle, that he easily found; then he cut the noosed ropes. The stallion scrambled up and stood trembling, making furtive motions as if to flee. But he ended by remaining quiet. The Mexican bridled the stallion, putting the bridle over the blinder-cloth, which the bridle thus held securely in place. Midnight fought against taking the bit, but yielded at last, in his blind terror. Once he had the stallion thus tamed, the Mexican led him through the corral gate. Soon he had the dun mare and was astride of her, the bridle in his hand. Midnight, sensing that he was following another horse, was calmed. She whickered at him. The stallion answered. The Mexican spurred her gently; she began to walk. The stallion, treading high, shivering, followed. The

staid Peters horses called a good-by, but had no answer.

Soon, as the twilight settled, the dun mare, the Mexican, Midnight, were but moving shapes against the growing darkness.

Then the Peters house and all about it were silent, lonesome.

CHAPTER VIII

JUST A LITTLE DIRT

TRAFFIC dull, Maretta Esquiemala leaned on the inside of her bar, puffing a meditative cigarette. The regular patrons of the house were about their usual recreations. Presently, with tinkle of hat-rim bells, Jose Pedro Aguilar came in, hands on hips, smiling, puffing clouds of smoke akin to her own.

"You are at last here, Pedro?" she said in Spanish.

"*Si, dulce, Señorita.*"

"Do you know the news, then?"

"No; what?"

"That old man Barnquist, he is dead."

"How? So sudden? His heart?"

"Yes, his heart. But it was a bullet that stopped it."

She told him rapidly of the news from Coppered Jack. His eyes sparkled. He said:

"Now the young Señor Barnquist, he comes here; makes of our place his hang-out? It will be money for us, eh?"

"Not our place; Pedro, attend! But *my* place, I have paid the purchase money, in full, since last week."

He bit his lip, then smiled agreeably.

"Ah, yes," he agreed, puffing smoke at her playfully; "your place. What matters it, so long as we love and are agreed? Come, let me tell you what I have done to-day."

He told her of his theft of Midnight.

"When that big cowman from Vernon stopped here for aguardiente yesterday," he said, "I resolved to have his horse. He stopped in Coppered Jack. I watched him. I followed him to Twin Springs. To-day I went there, found all away, got the beauty. He is in the covered stable — where I keep my 'borrowed' horses. The search will be far and wide. I shall have the stallion here. When the excitement dies down, I can run him over into old Mexico and realize a fine sum."

"You are a man, Pedro," she approved admiringly.

He said nothing — but kissed her warmly. Then he jingled out. As he went, she smiled at his back.

"Paff, for you, Señor Jose Pedro Aguilar," she confided to the burned-out end of her cigarette. "Do you think I prefer a man who makes a living stealing horses to one who is already heir to Ox Bow? No, indeed! When the Señor

Bar*nee* comes again to tempt me — Basta! I can stand anything but temptation."

She paused, smiled again, went on:

"And if Jose Pedro Aguilar does n't like it" —

She smiled wickedly, rolled herself a fresh corn-husk cigarette, and smoked it with enjoyment.

Maretta Esquiemala was just a handsome tiger-woman, full of desires, of wants that a border *aguardiente* shop never could satisfy. In fancy she saw herself mistress of Ox Bow. True, the young lord of the place was five years younger than she, and she was a hundred years older than he was in experience. But only she, with her man-wisdom, knew the depths of the feeling she had aroused in the young cattle princeling who, by a sudden turn, was become the master of the whole south end of San Felicé County. At their last meeting, when she had bantered him so warmly, she had felt the fire leap from his very veins, and with the knowledge of her kind, she believed that he would come to her, — as soon as he could.

She would have been surprised to learn, however, that no thought of her was in Barney Barnquist's mind as he sat tiptilted back against the side wall of the Thimble Belt waiting for sheriff and coroner. The younger element, flocking about him, finally trickled away, out of respect to such dim proprieties as obtained and persisted

against the force of an all-pervading public excitement, for the violent taking off of a man of such weight as the elder Barnquist was an event in Coppered Jack's annals. In due time Barnquist, the younger, outwardly as peaceful as was Barnquist the elder, sleeping so quietly atop the long bar, was flanked on either side by Weaver, sputtering again, chewing his pipe-stem's stump, and by Lars Maltrane, saturnine, his hard, agate eyes wide staring, his thin, whitened eyebrows working as he raised his brow and wrinkled it in thought.

Maltrane's eyes ranged from the dead man back to his gun that, so fouled and now so cold, was on the bar near the head of the corpse, — the *corpus delecti* and the evidence-in-chief all together.

Below the fatal expanse of bar so occupied, Brown and Barnum waited on a steady dribble of trade that entered by the back door, word having been passed out that, pending the coming of San Felicé's officialdom, folks had better come in that way.

Finally all Coppered Jack had had its drink and its glance at the center of attraction. Brown leaned against the farthest end of the bar. Barnum was polishing with his bar-cloth, after the manner of his kind. Something scraped on the wood. Barnum shook out the cloth, and the something dropped on to the bar's top.

"A .38 ball," Barnum said, holding it up. "This cloth was the bottom of my pile. I just got to it. Must have been one from the mêlée. 'T ain't battered, nestin' into th' soft cloths. Nicked on th' nose, just like the ones Peters always uses."

Parley Brown casually picked it up, chucked it with the guns, and said:

"I guess there 's enough of them in th' walls of th' joint to s'ply all th' evidence needed, eh, Barney? But we 'd better keep it?"

"Yes, Parley," said the tiptilted heir with bitterness.

"I plumb thought I 'd found something," Barnum said, still polishing.

"You got so much time for thoughts, you better clean th' dirt off'n that mirror behind th' bar," and Brown waved his hand toward the fixture. "I dunno what 's on it, but it seems to be all spattered up wit' somethin'."

Young Barnquist's chair came down on all fours with a bang.

"Aw, what 's th' use bein' so particular?" he snapped. Then he paused, as he noted that they all were looking at him.

"The sheriff an' coroner an' ever'body 'll be in, that 's so," Barnum said decidedly, taking a dry cloth. He wheeled to the mirror, wiped, stopped, wiped more energetically. Barnquist leaned back against the wall again. Maltrane

and Weaver did likewise. Parley Brown settled into the corner the far end of the bar made with the wall.

Barnum, the wiping done, flicked a sheet of paper on to the bar and shook the wiping cloth out over the paper. They were all watching him. He was seen to lay down the cloth and begin to putter with particles that they had heard rattle off the cloth on to the crisp paper. He balled the particles with his finger ends, patting them together.

"Tha 's funny," he said.

"Wha 's funny?"

It was Maltrane now, his hard eyes glittering. His eyes were still, agate points of tensest interest. His body did not move. Like a coiled cottonmouth snake he was silent, concentrated. Weaver champed at his pipestem; Barnquist fidgeted in his tiptilted chair. Brown got up.

"Why, that stuff on the mirror, all splattered there, was n't there before th' row began. I cleaned th' glass early to-day, same 's usual. An' it 's like — like — "

He was considering.

"I dunno what it 's like," he said, his eye holding Barnquist's for a moment. He lounged carelessly against the bar, twisted the paper into a rough spiral, cast it underfoot.

Barnquist's chest relaxed in a half-sigh. Mal-

trane's eyes flashed from Barnum to Barnquist, then were fixed on his own gun. Like a serpent on a rock he waited.

Presently Barnum remarked:

"Why, here 's some change that I forgot to put into th' till."

He picked it off the bar, fumbled it. A piece or two went behind the bar. He stooped and scrabbled about on the floor for it. They could hear paper rustling there. When Barnum straightened up, he had the coins. He tilled them, was at ease again. Brown yawned. Weaver champed his pipe-end. Maltrane got up silently and glided out of the room. As the door clicked after him, Barnquist sighed again, brought his chair down with a thud, stood up, ordered a drink with a swagger, then sat down again.

"Weaver," he said suddenly, "you find Mal and ride to th' home ranch with him an' have th' news told there. I never thought of sending some one special. An' have th' boys ride in for th' inquest, Alec Pardee at th' head o' them all. I want Ox Bow repr'sented, *strong*."

"Sure, boss," and Weaver champed up and out.

Brown now found business outside. Barnquist shot a glance across the room at Barnum, who suddenly stooped and came upright again with a wisp of paper twisted and held up for in-

spection. Barnquist came across the room to him eagerly.

"It 's th' paper tha 's got th' dirt off'n th' mirror in it," Barnum announced mysteriously, "an' I know what 's made that dirt, too."

"What?" Barnquist demanded, with a fearful glance at the silent form at the front end of the bar.

"Some kind o' a greasy soap," Barnum said quietly. "I 've handled 'nuff soap, washing out bottles and glasses an' cleanin' bars an' fixtures, in my time. It 's th' same 's th' dirt on Mal's gun, there. He stood there an' fired six times, right at Peters, an' never touched a hair, but he slathers my mirror all over with soapy stuff. What 'd he do, boss, play y' for a sucker an' give you th' double X?"

"Oh, I guess Mal was fair an' square," Barnquist laughed. "He jus' plumb shot nervous-like. Lemme have that paper o' dirt."

Barnum passed it over, Barnquist undid it, tested the black substance between his finger ends, sniffed at it. He laid it out on the bar and glanced at Barnum critically.

"You see here, Barnum," he said quietly; "you 're too good a fellow to waste your time back o' this bar. I need a clerk and timekeeper out to Ox Bow, at a hundred a month. You 're not gettin' over sixty here. Come with me?"

"I 'll go you," Barnum said.

Barnquist's hand closed on the wisp of paper. He edged it on to the floor and trod it under foot. Barnum produced a bottle. They drank. Barnum closed one eye in a furtive wink. Barnquist matched it, then shot a glance of fear at that which occupied the other end of the bar.

"Man down to th' wagon yard told me Weaver was lookin' for me — for you, boss," came Lars Maltrane's cold voice out of the rear room.

Barnquist wheeled, hand at hip.

"Oh, is that you, Mal?" he said easily. "Yes, I want that you and Weaver should ride out to Ox Bow and tell folks of pap's being killed an' have th' boys ride out for th' inquest. A little public opinion bearin' on to Harvison won't do any harm."

"Tha 's a good move," the man with the cold eyes said.

He came forward, his eyes on the wisp of paper that Barnquist had trodden under foot. Then his eyes swept up to those of Barnquist. He took the drink that Barnum nimbly poured out for him, wiped the back of his hand across his alcohol-dampened lips and turned and went silently out.

"He 's got a mighty bad walled eye," Barnum said, after Maltrane had vanished.

"He 's cold, ice-cold," Barnquist shivered just a bit. "Got one bit o' pride — that he works for

one man at a time, like. He never lets his work as dep'ty interfere wit' his work at Ox Bow. He did n't never, even f'r dad. An' w'en he 's actin' as Harvison's first dep'ty, he 's all dep'ty. He 's ice-cold, wall-eyed — a bad *hombre.*"

CHAPTER IX

HARVISON IS TIRED

A CLATTER of hooves at the far end of Coppered Jack, a general craning of necks, a buzz of conversation ushered in Sheriff 'Lonson Harvison and Coroner Doctor Eastman Alberstone and several deputies. Right after them came Ed Burlane in the buckboard. He drew up at the Wickson house and put out the ponies and wagon. He left Berenice there and got Peters. Together with Wickson and several staid old-timers, they went toward the Thimble Belt, whither all Coppered Jack was tending.

And finally, headed by Lars Maltrane and Weaver, came a score of Ox Bow retainers — hard-bitten, hard-eyed men — Foreman Pardee bringing up their jingling rear. Burlane and Peters shoved to the fore. Wickson and his handful of old-timers kept to the front of the room. The Ox Bow contingent was ahead of them. Then came the mixed folk of Coppered Jack. Sheriff Harvison and deputies and Alberstone speedily improvised a tribunal out of the chairs in the rear room and the table. Alberstone made a rather hasty examination of the

body of the slain man and of the weapons. With rough skill the doctor probed out the bullet from the keyhole-shaped wound just over the heart. Its end was nicked well!

"I 'd like for to hear what 's what about this matte'," Harvison said, taking his seat and laying his gun on the table. His deputies against the wall flanked him. "You, Mal, c'm here. You 're first deputy down in this corner. You were in this. How 'd it all happen? I 'd put you on th' posse here, but that you 're one o' th' witnesses."

Thus ordered, Maltrane came forward and told his story:

He had seen and heard the quarrel between Peters and Barnquist the day before. The two had made up that day, had entered the Thimble Belt to cement their new friendship with a drink. The Barnquists, father and son, and Peters, were at the bar — had had some drinks. He and Weaver were in the back room, when they heard the quarrel break out anew. They came out, saw Peters whip out his gun. They drew their guns, began to blaze away. They "shot it out, th' hull wad," he concluded. Could n't seem t' hit nothin' first, so I kep' fannin' th' hammer."

Harvison ran his fingers through his tangled beard and spat.

He rolled his keen gray eyes over the table

at Alberstone, a loose-jointed, meditative sort of man with a sallow face and deep-set blue eyes.

"You an' Weaver shot it out, your hull wad?" the sheriff asked. "Missed Peters clean?"

"Yes, sher'ff."

"You ought to have target practice, Mal," quietly. "I can't have no first dep'ty f'r this end o' San Felicé that can't shoot no better 'n that."

He cultivated his beard's roots again, spat, toyed with his gun's butt absently.

Weaver, called, corroborated Maltrane at every point.

"Yes, I shot it out, my hull wad, too, an' missed."

"An' then Peters jumped you, eh, after he slew Barnquist?"

"Tha 's it, sheriff," audibly champing his pipe-stem.

"Pass on," and Harvison waved him aside.

Parley Brown developed a very confused recollection of events in general, but had seen Peters draw and fire at Barnquist, who fell.

Barnum admitted that at the first sign of real hostilities he had ducked behind the bar and remained there. Had seen Peters draw first, though.

"Sensible barkeeper," Harvison praised him. "'T wa'nt none o' your concerns who shot whose head from his neck."

As Barnum sagged back into the obscurity of the crowd, he found Maltrane, oddly enough, at his side. The man of the agate eyes whispered into Barnum's ear:

"Why n't yu' tell him 'bout that dirt on th' mirror?"

Barnum blinked, then answered readily:

"Why, he did n't ask me. This ain't a reg'lar inquest; on'y Harvison's own personal inquiry. I 'll tell 'bout that on th' trial, though, Lars. I think there 's something in it."

"You better," the cold, even voice came into his ear. He felt a chill go over his shoulder blades at the rasp of it.

Young Barnquist was asked to step before the sheriff's table. Barney went, all eyes upon him. He was neither forward nor timid. His eyes swept over the people with a friendly, appealing look. Then back to the form on the bar, his glance carrying the glance of all others with it and reminding them that there was his father, and that he, the Barnquist heir, stood in his stead, to punish and to reward.

"There really is n't much to tell," he said steadily. "I 'm not ready with my gun. Pap always treated me like a boy, 's you all know, folks. Well, we came in with Peters there, to drink and make up. All of a sudden Peters he got riled at somethin' and drawed. Pap reached for his gun, but 't was too late. Me? I 'm clumsy

with a gun. I never shot it out with any one. Before I c'd get my gun out, Weaver an' Mal had begun to shoot, an' Peters went in after them. Then Burlane, that stranger, came bulgin' in, with his guns, and that ended it all. It happened so quick I could n't act, much."

"But you saw Peters kill your dad?" Harvison inquired.

"Yes — shoot him — cold turkey —"

There was a hum of anger from the Ox Bow crowd. A shuffle of feet in the rear of the room told of the old-timers, with Peters, shifting their weights on their tired feet. The deputies behind Harvison and Alberstone tensed, then relaxed as the Ox Bow folks calmed.

"Where were you when Peters shot?" Harvison asked.

"At Peters' side. I had jumped away to get room to swing my gun. It caught in th' holster. I came toward him just as he fired."

"You c'n pass, son," Harvison said kindly.

Young Barnquist sat down in one of the chairs beside the table that happened to be empty. So, when Peters came forward, in response to the sheriff's call, they were, accused and accuser, very close to each other.

"You tell us what happened, Peters," Harvison said crisply.

"It 's 'bout like Barney has said," Peters said, uncovering his head and speaking quietly, "'s

far's th' friendly drink's concerned. There was no real a'gument betwixt us, sher'ff. Fi'st news I knew, Weaver an' Mal were a-blazin' away at my back. I wheeled, to find my gun twitched out o' my holster. Old Barnquist was away back against th' wall; Barney here up th' bar f'om me. I see I was in a jack-pot, an' I leaped for th' nearest, Mal an' Weaver, there, as I c'd tell their guns were emptied by th' time I woke up to what was goin' on."

"What was goin' on?" Sheriff Harvison asked.

"Nothin' but a cheerful plan to git me in here, start a row an' kill me an' lay it onto me," Peters said evenly.

Barnquist snapped erect and answered him, face to face:

"You lie, Peters. You made your boasts yesterday what you 'd do, if things were n't jus' so-an'-so — "

"Now, you sit down, son," Harvison cautioned; "you might git something stirred up that would n't settle without a rope-stretchin', an' I don't want that in San Felicé, not an *irregular* rope-stretchin'."

A low growl came from the Ox Bow contingent. The deputies shifted their weights against the wall. Quick-darting glances shot across the pool of human heads in between. Peters, at a wave from the sheriff's hand, retired.

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Alberstone leaned over and conferred with Harvison.

"Tha 's all th' news I care to hear, now," Harvison announced, at the close of this whispered chat with his conferee.

There was a movement in the crowd. Ed Burlane pushed his way through, shouldering easily aside a half dozen Ox Bovians, who yielded ground to him gingerly, — but more readily when they had viewed his calm eyes and big shoulders.

"I 'd like to be called, too," Ed suggested.

Harvison swept him with a glance of open scorn.

"You heard what I said," he growled, currying his beard again. "The sheriff o' San Felicé 's got all the news he wants — *now!*"

Ed's eyes engaged those of the official. He saw nothing behind their barrier. The officer was stubborn, crafty. He swept Ed aside with:

"This 's only a preliminary inquiry. The coroner wishes me to say there 'll be no inquest at this time. We 're goin' to investigate a bit before doin' anything" —

Ox Bow stirred in the room's front spaces. Ox Bow growled as the hard-bitten men shifted belts ominously.

"Peters, you," and Harvison's voice rang out clear.

"Right here, sher'ff," and he came forward.

"You 'll go into th' calaboose, pendin' further inquiries. You 're held on s'spicion *only,*" meaningly.

Ox Bow emitted a combined hum of approval. Barney Barnquist's eyes were approvingly on the sheriff. Alberstone leaned over and whispered to his colleague, who nodded.

"Now, boys," Harvison admonished, "remember, no illegal doin's in San Felicé. I c'n tie any knots needed in ropes."

Barnquist got up and waved his hand. Hesitatingly but certainly at the last he made a plea for law and order.

"I am the aggrieved party, if there is any," he said slowly; "le 's not have any violence. I 've a sad duty to perform," waving his hand toward the form on the bar. "With that before me, I ask that there be no violence."

"Th' body c'n now be removed," Harvison announced, "an' thanks f'r that pacifyin' speech, Barney."

Ox Bow came forward in serried ranks, people opening out before them. The body of the dead cattle king was hoisted on to the shoulders of his erewhile retainers and taken out. A wagon was requisitioned, and the corpse was taken from town. Peters, ringed by deputies, went out to the town jail.

Alberstone took possession of the weapons that Burlane had piled on to the bar. Harvison ex-

amined them carefully, noting the fouled condition of Maltrane's. He found Burlane at his shoulder. The day had waned by now; Barnum was lighting up.

"I 'm a mighty curious man," Burlane announced, as soon as he had Harvison's attention. They were alone at the end of the bar for the moment.

"So 'm I," Harvison answered.

"My curiosity takes this slant t'day," Ed volunteered, getting no encouragement from the uninviting eyes of the sheriff, who cultivated his beard carefully as he fingered the dirty gun; "takes this shape, Sheriff Harvison: Why did n't you call me to tell what I know about th' shootin'?"

"Oh," oracularly, "you 'll have time 'nuff in cou't to tell all that, by mighty.

"I seen a man — once," Harvison continued, squinting down the barrel of the dirty gun, "who pestered a sheriff so much he lost a trick."

Ed looked into the harsh-featured face of him searchingly.

"Yes, son," Harvison continued, squinting down the barrel anew; "he pestered that sheriff till he lost his trick. Sheriffs is human — almost."

"I 'm going to shut up," Ed said.

"You 're takin' a long time doin' it," said Harvison grimly.

Silence then, potent, while man probed for what was in man's mind and heart and soul.

"You 're f'om Vernon, X. M. T.?" Harvison asked suddenly.

"Yes, lately."

"Vernon end o' San Felicé 'bout balances this end, son. I got to get elected again. I 'm goin' to. I been bossed around by Barnquists quick an' slow, long an' short, till I 'm onable to make up my own mind. But that 's neither here nor over yander, son. Whoever killed old Barnquist 's got to swing."

"He ought to," said Ed shortly.

He went out, followed by the sly, quiet smile of Harvison.

Ed went straight to the Wickson house. He found the family at supper. He drew Wickson aside and asked:

"What fer fellow is this sheriff? I never run up against him before. Is he a man?"

"No; he 's an official," Wickson replied. "Last man talks to him is apt to get him. But he runs his office as sheriff; takes pride in it. He won't let nothin' happen to Peters while he 's in jail, I don't believe."

Burlane was silent. He tried in vain to reconcile this deliberate judgment of Wickson, an observing old-timer, with the queer energy with which Harvison had given him a warning not to argue the case with him.

He went in and found Berenice with supper in a basket, ready to go to the calaboose.

"No; I don't want any one to go with me," she said; "I want that dad should have a warm meal to make him comfortable."

"You let me go 'long an' carry that basket," he insisted.

He took the handle and started. She followed, protesting at first. They found Peters cheerful and left the basket with him. When they came to the Wickson house, Ed said:

"Miss Ber'nice, I 'm goin' back to Twin Springs. I want to have ol' Midnight here. I 'll put th' ponies out in th' corral. I c'n be back by sleeptime. I 'll bid you good night, now."

"Good night," and she gave him her warm, loyal hand. "I 'll be all right with Mother Wickson. And thank you for what you 've done for us so far, Mr. Burlane."

His hand tingled with the warmth of hers. He swept his hat low in salute and went for the ponies and buckboard. A few moments later she heard him clatter up the street, outbound for Twin Springs.

CHAPTER X

OH, MIDNIGHT!

THE night had closed in, dark, still. There was a feeling of a coming storm in the air. Little breezes whiffled about from all quarters. The ponies felt it and pranced in the dark. Out in the west the lightning winked an eye, but no thunder sounded yet, — the storm was too distant.

The tinkle of a mandolin, the gleam of embers, told Ed of the Mexican ditch-diggers' camp. He turned aside at the ponies' urging. They knew where was the side trail that led to the home corral and the shelter of the sod stable against the advancing storm.

Ed listened for the whicker of Midnight as he caught the loom of the buttes and then of the ranch buildings. He called and had no reply.

"Lil old son-of-a-gun," he said to the nigh pony, "he 's off in th' corral corner, hobnobbin' with them Peters hosses. He 's apt to hide out thataway on me."

He brought the ponies to a stand. They

whickered, and the Peters horses replied. Ed listened again for Midnight, but had no sound of *his* whicker.

"Cute son-of-a-gun," he said to the off pony, whacking him with the hame-strap into the corral. He wheeled the buckboard into the stable, went to the bars, called:

"Midnight. Oh, Midnight."

He listened. There was no sound.

"Mighty queer," he thought; "I 'll go 'round by th' stable an' see if he 's there. I 'd like to rub his nuzzle, dog-dast his shiny hide."

He went softly down to the stable's end, and the lightning, far-gleaming from the storm's curtain, showed him no Midnight at the fence there. He went to the other end and could see no loom of blackness on four legs there, either. Ed sauntered out to the fence, stooped to get a grass blade, — a Texan's infallible aid to clear thought. He got it, sat on his "hunkies", chewed, thought, called again:

"Oh, Midnight! Here, old son-of-a-gun!"

There was a croon of endearment in the pleading. Ed gave his big stallion the love other men gave their sweethearts. He never had had a serious affair with a girl; he had grown up shy, reserved, clean-living, son of an old cowman and his wife whom fortune had not treated well. Left an orphan early, Ed had learned to fend for himself along the old frontier. The love of Mid-

night was his one great passion up to that time. The meeting with Berenice had made him think less often of the stallion during the past days, and he had turned home with his heart yearning for the feel of the old rascal's velvety muzzle against his cheek, the sound of his deep-chested whicker at the corral bars. And now —

"Oh, Midnight!" he called plaintively. Never before had he been compelled to call more than once for the horse to come. In corral, on open prairie; in daylight, moonlight, in pitchiest dark, the horse would always come gladly. The giant equine always showed his joy in his master's presence, carried him proudly, galloping, fox-trotting, walking, making pretty *pasears,* as his master's mood demanded. But now —

"Old son-of-a-gun! You, Midnight!"

There came a gusty tug of wind. Nearer, sharper, heaven-rending lightning split the vault of gloom. The picture was printed on Ed's vision, then it was gone: — The trap noose, its end snubbed about the fence post nearest at hand; the trampled soil of the corral there; the other noose, also discarded in the hurry of the captor's flight with his prize. Then the night closed in again. The wind whipped up.

"They 've got you, son-of-a-gun, old Midnight," Ed called to the night. "They 've got you, oh, my own pal. I 'll get them — "

His hand fell on to the butt of his gun. He

started up, wild, staring. Then came the thought of Berenice, her need, her father in jail.

"I 'm in a jack-pot, old Midnight," he thought. "Yes, a reg'l'r J. P. Where 's th' way out? If you were me, you 'd leave ever'thing to come to me. Miss Ber'nice won't need me till morning. I 'm goin' to look for my old son-of-a-gun of a pal of a hoss."

Searching out Peters' pierced-horn lantern. Burlane set its candle alight and, with its gleams making dim, shifting patterns, walked from the corral bars in the direction the tracks of Midnight beckoned. Finding that the thief apparently had made no effort at covering the trail, Ed presently came back to the corral, caught one of the Peters horses, saddled it, forked it and still carrying the lantern, rode in the general direction the sign of the stolen horse trended. Every little while he dismounted and cast about for tracks. He found them easily.

"He 's either a plum' fool, or else he 's got a buried ace somewhere," Ed told the Peters cayuse, wise old nag. "He don't even try to get on to the swells' tops, where it would be drier and th' hoof marks would be less plain. Keeps jogging along in th' dips like he was sure he 'd never be headed."

The trail took him almost due east for a time. Then it swung abruptly south with a little easting, and of a sudden Ed found why the marauder

had not seen fit to take precautions, for the sign of Midnight and captor went blind into the well-marked sweep of a great herd of cattle.

"Knew he 'd cut this cattle-drive sign here, th' thief did," Ed judged. "An' now where does it tail into, back-tracking it?"

He followed the herd's broad pathway backward. There was no reason for doing that, instead of going forward. But it was either way, and Ed took the back track on the first impulse. The rain that had been threatening came spatting down; far lightning blazed; the thunder boomed. The old lantern guttered out. Burlane found himself, after discarding the lantern, still able to keep to the cattle track by the light of the flashes.

Presently the rain ceased, and with it, as Ed knew, all chance of following Midnight's trail farther that night, even had he happened upon it, for the beating of the rain had made all ground signs dimmer.

But he still went forward and came presently to a swell of the plain higher than others roundabout, and from it glimpsed afar the lights of large buildings. From the general lay of the land, although he was a stranger in that region, he knew it to be the Barnquist ranch. He had passed it the day before, on his ride from Vernon into the Coppered Jack region, and had seen at a distance from the main trail the general arrangement of the Barnquist buildings. Al-

though he had been riding for a job, the general reputation of the gang that Barnquist kept about him had made him decide not to stop there. So he had drifted on, without definite plan, and the sight of the row between Peters and Barnquist had changed his indecision over the future into a decision to see Peters through and clear on the other side of his present troubles, if that were a possible thing.

Ed twitched the Peters cayuse out of the cattle trail which he now knew for the recent path of one of the Barnquist main herds, which had been driven off to some probably distant water and pasture grounds. Ed kept well out from the Barnquist buildings, figuring that the horse thief, if he had come that way, would have done the same. He kept turning over in his mind where the thief would go. Surely not back over the Vernon trail, when he, Burlane, had so plainly stated to several in and about Coppered Jack that he was from Vernon. To take a horse as handsome as Midnight, back to Vernon, where he was so well known, would be equal to suicide, unless the thief could show a valid bill of sale from Midnight's owner, for without it a stranger possessing Ed's horse would have been hanged, in those days, on sight. Such was the short shrift meted out to the horse thief in the old times.

" There 's either a hide-out down thisaway, or when he hit th' cattle trail," Ed judged, " he

turned up-trail and is a long ways off by now. I can't do anything till morning, anyway. I better see what I can find off beyond here."

Presently, having circled the Barnquist outfit, Ed guided his pony southwest again. He had been going slowly, and hours had passed. The storm had rumbled off over the horizon and showed now but as an occasional rosy glow on piled-up cloud banks. The air was fresh and sweet. A little owl hooted from the entrance to some near-by prairie-dog hole; afar a coyote hymned the stars.

Ed's cayuse came to the main trail below the Barnquist branch. Ed now knew where he was and, remembering the Mexican *aguardiente* joint below him and thinking to gain some information there, he let the cayuse fox-trot while he lolled in the saddle.

Tinkle of mandolin; sheen of wavering lights; slurring, liquid buzz of Spanish came to Ed as he drew up before the Chaparral Cock. He left the wise old Peters horse at the tie-rail and lounged lithely in.

A group of Mexicans were at poker in a corner nearest the door. A lone lad strummed the mandolin and hummed "Sobre des Olas." At one end of the bar was a tall-hatted man, whose hat bells tinkled as he quirked his head from side to side in gentle discussion with the lady of the house. Ed strolled up, gave the woman the cus-

tomary smile and ordered a drink. The man in the steeple hat eyed Ed aslant, edged away and presently, as Ed joked with the lady of the house, was gone.

To have a Mexican vanish from the presence of a Texan who showed a disposition to joke with a woman was nothing new in those days, so Ed took it as the usual tribute of a Mexican to American prowess.

Maretta had recognized Ed in a flash as the man who had ridden the big black stallion by her place the day before. She knew what he was looking for as soon as his body had crossed the doorsill. With her, to attract men, to turn them to her own uses, was instinctive. Born and bred to the business of the wayside *aguardiente* seller, she was true to her type, scheming, ardent or cold by turn, calculating. She saw in Ed a man who might be useful to play off against Aguilar, did that sometimes bothersome gentleman become too irksome to her. She thought that Barney Barnquist and Pedro might possibly come to use of weapons over her in time. Other men had. Why not they? And she did not want the new heir to Ox Bow killed, as she thought he certainly would be, did he try to shoot it out with Pedro. Therefore she saw that the entry of Ed on the scene might be made to redound to her benefit, did she but take advantage of it aright.

Ed leaned forward with just the needed shade of confidential inquiry.

"*Señorita mia,*" he wheedled, "if I asked you, as friend to friend, a favor, would you grant it?"

Maretta flashed him a smile and poured out for herself a tiny drink to companion Ed's.

"Of a surety, Señor," she agreed.

"I have lost a horse — one that I love as a man might love a new wife," he said earnestly.

"Well?" and she sipped from her glass's rim.

"I would do much — much, for any one who could tell me where my horse is."

"He was that beeg, so beeg *caviard* you rode through here but yeesterday?" sipping again prettily.

"It is so, Señorita *mia.*"

"Eef I view heem, Señor, I shall eenform you. Was he estolen, or is he estrayed?"

"I think but strayed," Ed paltered, anxious not to have it known that he suspected downright theft, otherwise the thief, hearing of it, would be more wary.

"Hardlee would a man esteal such a dearling horse and bring heem to so public a place," she said, tossing down the little drink, — what her red, pouting lips had left after sipping so; "but I may get news for you. Eef so, *basta!* Come in a few days. Who can tell? Much gossip drifts into such a place."

Ed did not make the mistake in dealing with

her that a coarser nature might have. He offered her no bribe, no exaggerated attentions. He paid exactly for his drink, bowed and went out quietly.

Maretta continued to gaze at the door space long after Ed had clattered away. She lighted her a new cigarette and apostrophized its glowing end:

"Ah, those Americanos! They know how to be nice to a woman. Decidedly, Señor Aguilar, your chances grow less and less. That Barnquist mule I can make love me; but this big man who has lost the horse of midnight hue, *basta,* him I could love."

She finished her cigarette, spoke crisply to the late stayers. The mandolin ceased its plaint; the card game closed with a snap. Soon the room was deserted, and Maretta stood behind her bar, putting things in order for the night.

Came now a light step; the tinkle of hat-rim bells. She glanced toward the door. Aguilar, hands on hips, swaying, came in smiling, cigarette smoke wreathing his dusk-rose cheeks, his eyes sparkling. He addressed Maretta in Spanish:

"Tell me, *dulce,*" giving her a warm pressure of the hand over the bar, "does he suspect where the great *caviard* is?"

"No, Pedro," she crooned to him, accepting his proffered endearments. "He thinks it has

but wandered away, and that by search he shall find it again."

"Let him so think," he laughed; "and for to-night?"

He glanced at her tenderly.

"And for to-night I do not care to be bothered longer," she evaded. "I must be up early; many will pass and repass all the day to-morrow; trade will be brisk. Many will come and go to the funeral of that *anciene* Barnquist. Do not be sentimental, Pedro. It is bad for — business. Catch the lock as you go out."

She boxed his ear gently, wriggled from his arms that were stretched over the bar toward her. She vanished into a rear room where she slept, and he knew he was dismissed. He went out, slamming the door after him. But he consoled himself by going to the underground stable below the Chaparral Cock, a stable made by digging out a space under a cut-bank in a dry arroyo and coaxing sod to grow atop the hackberry limbs that, interlaced, formed the roof. There he viewed Midnight again and laughed when the big stallion bit at him and kicked and squealed.

"You shall pay a gold piece for every kick and squeal," he said, "when the time comes for me to get you below the border into Old Mexico. Some hidalgo will pay well for you, my friend, well, well, indeed!"

CHAPTER XI

"ASHES TO ASHES!"

ALTHOUGH he had been kept subdued, pup-like, while the old wolf of Ox Bow lorded it in the full tide of life, Barney Barnquist knew in a rough and ready way what would be expected of him when he came to his majority and some day dominated. He knew very well that he could not lead in that frontier region just because he had money or because his father had had it. He knew that he must go through, himself.

He had been for months secretly cultivating himself with an ardor at which his domineering father would have been astounded, had he known. When by himself, Barney had practiced incessantly with his six-gun, and as he had unlimited credit for all sorts of saddlery, guns, ammunition and other frontier needfuls, although denied money in quantities, he had become what a man of his blood and inclinations might be expected to become, — a fine shot, quick as lightning. Up to now he had concealed this, affecting a lumbering, hesitant gun-play befitting a cub coming to manhood and not yet sure of himself.

There was a deeper craft in Barney Barnquist than any one had discovered. It had been founded on a remark of his father's in the former years when the youngster first had begun to take notice of the expansive activities of his parent.

"Barney, make men think you 're a little of a chump, when you 're wise, an' they 'll play you as if you were a chump, an' you c'n play them like a wise man an' beat them. No one expects to get beat by a plumb fool."

But now, he reflected on the day of his father's funeral, it was time to show some signs of the control he intended to exercise. He went about with just the right mixture of crisp, callow authority, and restrained grief. His usually surly face he had smoothed out. He went with slow tread, conferred several times with Alec Pardee, the grim, shifty-eyed ranch foreman, upon points of arrangement. He told off the pallbearers, after getting Pardee's favorable opinion on each selection. Lars Maltrane and Weaver were among the six delegated to carry the rough deal coffin to its resting place atop the largest roll of land behind the ranch house, and a cairn of stones, drawn from the foot of some not distant buttes, served to make sure that the coyotes would not rob the grave.

Sheriff Harvison and Coroner Alberstone, out from Coppered Jack for the funeral, were pressed into service, reading the ritual at the grave from

an old and well-thumbed copy of a Campbellite *Laudes Domini* that had once belonged to Barney's mother and that always served on grave occasions.

" ' Ashes to ashes, dust to dust ',' the sheriff intoned, dropping earth into the grave. The party followed, in order. A volley from six-guns was the final salute to Death. The funeral party mounted and wheeled back toward the ranch house. The Coppered Jack folk were in the rear. Barney spurred swiftly to the head of the cavalcade.

" ' D' y' notice, Alberstone," Harvison asked, " that that young cub-bear did n't th'ow no dust on to his dad's coffin? "

" Yes, but I s'pose he 's considerable het up today? "

" Huh-uh."

Arrived at the ranch house, Harvison and Alberstone rode into the open space before the house, where Barney already had halted, as if waiting for them. The Coppered Jack people kept with the two officials.

" Mr. Barnquist," the sheriff said deferentially, and it was easy to note that Barney felt elated at this form of address, " do I understand that there is a will or any papers you 'd like filed over at th' county seat? If not, you take charge, of course, pending the necessary legal formalities."

" Pap, he always said there 'd be no will; I ain't

looked," Barney answered, making his horse prance.

"If anythin' turns up like that, you feel free to call on me?" Sheriff Harvison ingratiated.

"Sure; thanks."

"G' day, Mr. Barnquist," nodding cordially. Alberstone and the sheriff rode off, the townsfolk after them.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Harvison muttered, as they turned into the main trail; "if God don't take ye, the devil must."

As soon as sheriff and coroner had gone, Barney twitched his mount about until he was facing the crowd. The women from the different houses and shacks about the place — Mexicans, breeds, all-whites — were on the fringes. Barney knew that something was expected of him, and he straightened up in the stirrups and spoke:

"Men, I 'm disposed to let matters run as before. Pardee will go on as ranch foreman in general, an' Lars Maltrane an' Weaver will be under me for personal work, like they were to pap."

Murmurs of approval greeted this announcement, that put everything in the familiar grooves for the new régime.

"An' you, Greasewood Kate," he called over the men's heads, "keep in charge indoors."

He caught her eye. It had a scornful look.

She tossed her handsome head and went indoors, followed by her flock of helpers. Last of them was the girl, Ess-Way, who turned and sought to catch Barney's eye. But he was already circled by the men, to whom he was giving some orders, routine and perfunctory, but in tones that showed his aggressiveness. The girl, head down, went sadly in.

"I guess th' young cub 's goin' to chaw right into things," Pardee joked as the men swung off to their bunkhouses.

Barney dismissed all save Weaver and Maltrane with a wave of the hand. He threw his bridle rein to Weaver and signed for Maltrane to come into the ranch office with him.

"Lars," he said, with a certain heavy, seemingly boyish touch of wistfulness, "sit down. I want t' talk with you."

"I been wantin' a gab with you all day," Lars said, slumping down into a seat without ceremony.

Young Barnquist's eyes glowed dully for a space, then dimmed. He sat down and faced the other across the rough desk.

"I 'll tell you, Lars, I 'm goin' to open up pap's desk an' things, an' I wanted you as witness. I want you to keep right on with me, as you were with pap — "

"That mean you want me to kill a man onct in a while? " with serpent-like stroke of satire. The

agate eyes glittered. His tongue licked out, just touched his thin lips, then flicked back again.

Young Barney stared at him in apparent alarm.

"I want you should be just what you were to dad — personal man, like — "

"Well," and the cold eyes narrowed to slits, but were brilliant still behind their ambushment of wrinkled lids, under their thin, whitened brows, "if you ask me to kill a man for you, cold turkey, Barney, don't put me up against him with an empty gun — again."

"What do you mean?" Barney started up, fists clenched, face so white it was chalky.

"I generally 'm able t' back up what I say, with a gun or anyway, s' long 's no one tampers with my weepon, Barney. I don't know th' bottom of what took place yest'day, but I will, some time."

He sank back into his chair, moody, his eyes gleaming dully. Barney eyed him. He composed his features, sat down, then smiled.

"You 're nervous because you did n't shoot straight," he said. "Peters was too quick at turnin' an' dodgin' when you shot."

"I ain't offerin' no alibis for my shootin' ner explainin' why I missed; it 's you that 's a-doin' that."

Silence now for a space, while the two studied each other. Barnquist held out his hand.

"You 'll stay, eh, Mal, at fifty dollars more a month than pap paid you."

Maltrane forced a laugh to his lips, held out his hand.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I 'll play you fair, as I did your dad, if you play me fair. I 've no morals, no honor, except this — I shoot for th' geezer that buys my grub. You be fair with me, an' I 'm fair with you — clear through, only remember that, as first dep'ty, th' sheriff has first call, if he wants it."

Plain elation shone on Barnquist's face. He had been apprehensive that the famed killer might take a vagrant notion to ramble after the death of his father. To have that known slayer at his side, to have the gun counted best in all San Felicé County at his service was a host in itself.

"Now, help me look for a will or other paper that may need filing," Barney urged. "You were with pap more 'n any one else and would know."

Together they went through the rough desk, the various boxes and odds and ends in which the heavy-fisted cattle king had kept his accounts and papers. There was little to examine. Running Ox Bow by "rule of thumb", the elder Barnquist had trusted little to books. He had one argument against it:

"Ever' time you make a memorandum on paper, you leave part o' your brains there."

So inside half an hour Barney Barnquist was able to let Maltrane go out, convinced that there was no will, no papers that would need filing and that, barring the usual formalities, he, as sole heir, would be lord of Ox Bow.

He sat smiling at the thought. Ox Bow! Square mile after square mile, with access to untold areas of free range! Thousands of head of long-horned cattle. Dozens of retainers. A man-killer, willing to go any lengths to suit the new master. A comfortable house, for the time and region; an income to put up a mansion if he so willed. Thousands of horses to select from. The finest of weaponry — smiles of women, who had already thrown themselves at his not unhandsome head. And there was the woman in the Chaparral Cock. After, if he tired of her, as he would of such a one, there was Berenice Peters.

Barney smiled again and juggled jinglingly some loose gold he had found in a cubby in the desk. He took out a coin, spun it, caught it, thought again of Maretta, who had scorned him because of lack of money to spend on her.

"I could buy a dozen like her for a handful of these," he solaced himself with.

He strolled to the window and looked off. His eye traveled to the top of that highest swell where was that lonely cairn of stones. He dropped the gold coin into his pocket, his face went white.

There came a rap at the door; the half-breed

housekeeper entered, without asking permission.

Greasewood Kate shut the door craftily. She came determinedly forward until she faced Barney.

"What do you want — in here?" he demanded firmly, his eyes engaging hers coldly.

"I want what? I want thees, Bar*nee,*" shaking a minatory forefinger under his nose. "I wanta you stop breeking my girl's heart. Tha 's all, Bar*nee.*"

"Oh, hell; it was all right for me to tucker 'round after Ess-Way when I was a boy. I 'm a man now. I 'm not a-goin'—"

Her face worked with rage. Her voice, though, went low.

"You, Bar*nee,* be of a care! You know your pap, he lef' a will?"

His face whitened, he started back, unable to overcome the surprise her direct blow brought upon him.

"No, why, no, Kate," he blundered. "Did he?"

"Yes, an' I know whare dhe will he ees, Bar*nee.*"

"Where?"

He leaned forward anxiously.

"Come, Kate, I was only foolin' about Ess-Way. O' course I like her. On'y I 'm all upsot t'day. Can't you see that?"

She regarded him with deep, somber eyes. A little touch of humor came into her smile.

"Your pap, he give me dhat will, one taime, year 'go, Bar*nee*. I send heem down Vernon. I 'll — it is in lawyer's room there — I know — "

"Could you get it up here, so 't I c'n see it before it 's filed?" he asked pleadingly. He did not doubt her; her position as house manager for his father made her story ring true to him; she had been trusted greatly.

"In a day or two, Bar*nee*."

She paused then, seemingly content. He gave her pleasant words, followed her into the passageway. Over her shoulder he saw Ess-Way wistful, at the end of the corridor. He went with her mother and spoke softly to the girl, made the excuse that he was pressed with business, but he gave her a short half-hour of companionship and ended it by leaving her happy again. Then he went off to order matters about the ranch, taking care that Maltrane, sardonic, cold of eye, was at his horse's tail as he rode.

"Mal," he said, as they got off beyond the buildings, "I want to git some points on six-gun work f'om you. You know I *all*-ways was a fool with a gun. You 're lightning-quick. Give me some pointers, will you?"

"Why, sure," and Lars began his coaching.

"You sure are too clumsy, kid," he said, after a few trials had gone wrong with the young man's

marksmanship; "th' boss o' Ox Bow 's got to be able t' shoot some, sometimes. He can't always *hire* his killin' done."

Happy with the crumbs of comfort he had cast to her, Ess-Way came to her mother in a quiet corner of the big ranch kitchen after Barnquist had gone. She dropped into the eloquent speech of her fathers of the desert fringes.

"Mother," she pleaded, "he has been so cold before for days; now, after you saw him, he is warm to me again. How did you do it? What did you tell him? I was so sure you would only make him angry at me by reminding him of his neglect; but, no, he is warm toward me. How did you do it?"

"Where there 's a will, there 's a way," Greasewood Kate quoted, recalling an old saying of Barney's mother.

"I no' unde'stand that," Ess-Way said, flirting her black braids.

"You don't have to, child," her mother said, hugging her closely. "You do as I say, and you 'll be mistress of Ox Bow yet."

"I don't care so much 'bout Ox Bow; it is Barney I want," the girl sobbed, creeping near her mother's broad bosom.

The breed woman kissed her child. Silence brooded over the kitchen as the shadows crept.

CHAPTER XII

THE INQUEST IS DELAYED

Sheriff Harvison and Coroner Alberstone tarried in Coppered Jack, but the jury to consider the death of Barnquist the elder was not impaneled. The sheriff craftily conferred with all concerned in the case and checked up the testimony of the several witnesses, especially that as to the guns being warm, hot or cold when piled on to the saloon's bar. He also gravely considered the nicked-nose bullet Barnum had found in the pile of bar cloths.

" Time enough to call the inquest when we get more facts; meanwhile Peters is in jail," Alberstone informed inquirers, such as Maltrane and Weaver, impelled to seek information by discreet hints from Barney Barnquist. That said, the two officials rode away to San Felicé again, called there by " press of duty."

At Barney's request Maltrane was reconfirmed in his titular position as deputy for the Coppered Jack section of San Felicé, and he thus had not only a killer in his employ, but one in office, as had his father before him.

Burlane heard of this when he was on his way to the calaboose one evening, after a day spent at Twin Springs making sure that all was right there. He had taken for his own use the best of the Peters nags, — a sorry substitute for Midnight. And posted on the front of the Emporium he had a reward of two hundred dollars for the recovery or return of Midnight " lost, strayed or stolen." His heart was heavy for the familiar whicker, the soft nuzzlings of the black rapscallion, yet he found a certain degree of solace in the companionship that Berenice gave him in her spare time. The girl was most faithful in her attendance upon her father, providing him with such choice viands as she could procure, aided and abetted by Mother Wickson.

Public opinion in Coppered Jack was about evenly divided as to Peters' guilt. Barnquist, sensible of that, was wary, treading with subtlety in public. A rush of new duties devolved upon him, too, and they kept him from going at once to the Chaparral Cock to pay his court to Maretta. He wanted to keep from such companionship until Peters was firmly fixed in people's minds as the killer of his father, and he knew that being seen flirting in daylight in a wayside Mexican joint would not help him in public opinion, for although the wayfaring Texan might stop in such a place for a casual frolic, he would not tolerate the companionship of a man who deliber-

ately placed himself on the Chaparral Cock level. So, despite Maretta's confidence in the power of her own charms over the young heir of Ox Bow, Barney surprised her and Aguilar by remaining away for quite a time after the funeral.

Work on the irrigation ditch went on apace, and Barney seemed to find a real interest in that. He found that the Mexican laborers and foremen cringed to him. He had too much sense to try to overbear Americans, though.

Now that he was firmly in the saddle at Ox Bow, he delved into the rough memoranda that his father had left with reference to the irrigation project. He had the Barnquist acquisitiveness and itch for power. He counted the teams passing to and from Little Soda, reckoned up the amount of water that could be sold to the Soda Corporation for drink for the mules, saw how only the free water they were able to get for part of their trip at Twin Springs interfered with the Barnquist plans for a practical monopoly on water supply outside of Coppered Jack, thought of how he could put the price per gallon up and up, did he but have free rein.

He continued to pay private attentions to Ess-Way. People at the ranch had known of his preference for the little three-quarter blood and had laughed at what had seemed only yesterday a boy-and-girl calf-love affair. None of the whites expected him to continue to act the cav-

alier to the pretty little squaw when he became old enough to pick and choose for himself among the white girls of the region. But, because of the possibility that Greasewood Kate would be able to produce some sort of a will, although she evaded his insistent demands, Barney thought it politic to draw the Indian girl on and on. She was too wrapped up in him to notice that his love-making was not genuine, as her untutored nature, swept by gusts of intense passion, made up what his lacked in warmth in their almost one-sided passages at hearts about the rambling, cool gallery, the inside corridors, the dimness of the aimlessly spaced rooms of the large Ox Bow ranch house.

Peters had resigned himself to a fairly long wait. He was never tired of telling Burlane that he ought to go on his quest for a job and not waste time trying to help him, Peters, out of what would prove to be only a temporary embarrassment. Ed, however, found himself able to explain his delay to his own and eventually to Peters' satisfaction by calling attention to the loss of Midnight and the need for hunting up that "old son-of-a-gun."

Burlane was at Twin Springs often, driving out with the buckboard, or riding the sedate old Peters cayuse, when alone. Berenice found it a relief from her anxieties to go with Ed on the buckboard trips. And, aside from that, she liked

to be near the quiet, polite, mild-mannered range rider.

Burlane felt himself coming more and more under the sway of the wholesome, warm-hearted girl, whose good sense and affection for her father and whose devotion to his welfare in his adversity filled him with admiration. He refrained, however, with the Texan's innate chivalry, from embarrassing her with proofs of his regard for her just then, when she was in trouble.

The girl felt the loss of Midnight keenly, as the horse had won her heart that first day by letting her ride him and by responding to her caresses with delighted nuzzlings. She urged Ed to devote all his spare time to the search for him, and Wickson, alive to the byways of trailside traffic thereabouts, ventured the shrewd suspicion that some one around the Chaparral Cock would, in the end, be found to know what had become of the stallion.

Barnum left the Thimble Belt a few days after the funeral at Ox Bow and appeared to claim the promised position as timekeeper and ranch account keeper. He proved to be ready with pen and ink. He never referred to the queer dirt he had found on the mirror after the killing of Barnquist, and Barney did not take up the matter again. There was little real work for Barnum to do, and that little he did well. If at times he watched his employer narrowly and kept a shrewd

eye on the gun-hand of Maltrane, Barney did not realize it, for, already deep in schemes for consolidating and extending his power, he only bothered himself with Barnum when he thought of using him for his own benefit.

As the days passed and Barney Barnquist did not come to pay her the anticipated court, Señorita Esquiemala became more and more restless, — more tired of the humdrum of keeping in order the mixed traffic of the Chaparral Cock. It needed but the flick of her eyelash; the dropping of one brown, deft hand to the sash in whose folds nestled her knife, to reduce the otherwhere fiery patrons of her bar to submission. Aguilar, watchful of an opportunity of getting Midnight down over the long trails in safety, was moody, silent and did not amuse her enough.

So it fell out that one afternoon Maretta called the stable boy to cinch up her own white mare and, mounting easily astride, she swung off up the trail toward Ox Bow. Her one idea was to come to some position where Barney would have to notice her. She trusted to her own power to turn any chance meeting with him to good account for herself.

On the way up she rode decorously enough, casting about in her mind for some excuse that would warrant her appearance at the big ranch. By the time she was at the trail's fork she had found none and had not met Barney or any of

his men. She rode past the fork, toward Coppered Jack, with the intention of going to the town, looking about and then back again, trusting to luck to bring about the meeting for which she craved.

Near the town she spied, well ahead, a buckboard. As she spurred toward it, she saw that the man driving the team was Ed Burlane. The handsome range rider had created a very favorable impression on her when he had called at the *aguardiente* shop that night when he was searching for Midnight. The spirit of a wanton's mischief stirred in her as she saw Burlane riding with a woman, — the girl of Twin Springs, of whom every one spoke so well!

Maretta pricked the white mare and swept up to the dawdling buckboard team. Berenice, leaning forward, was listening to Ed as he told her, with animation, some tale of life on the farther ranges and of Midnight's part in some of his adventures — of romance, swift action, the desire of youth.

"Who is that woman, Mr. Burlane?" she inquired, pointing, and Ed saw that the white horse whose rataplan they had heard behind them was now ahead, and that on it was sitting a very handsome, bright-eyed, pouting-lipped creature that, in her outdoor attire, he had difficulty in knowing for the wayside barroom girl.

"Eexcuse me, Señor, but is thees not the Señor

Burlane?" she was asking, as she reined in her mare with practiced hand.

The wind whipped her dusk-rose cheeks; her red lips curled just a bit. Her eyes, on Ed's face, were like a caress.

Berenice noted the look, sensed the tensing of Ed beside her.

"Why, sure," Ed said heartily, now recovered from his astonishment. "This is Mr. Burlane. You are the lady of the Chaparral Cock?"

"*Si*, Señor," and her smile grew warmer still. "Why do you not call to veeseet us no more, eh, Señor?"

She sent the barbed arrow of another of her smiles at him, and more of it at Berenice. Then, calling over her shoulder as she twitched the white mare around toward Ox Bow, she called:

"Come soon, that I may talk weeth you what we talked of before, Señor. Soon, I say."

"All right," Ed answered. "Gid-dap!"

The ponies started to canter. Ed was silent. He glanced aside at the girl. She was still, white of face —

"What — what did she want you to come to *that* place for?" Berenice asked, plainly showing her aversion.

"Who? Her?" Ed was plainly worried. "Why, I butted into that joint when I was a-huntin' for Midnight that first night he was gone. I ragged with that girl a bit to find out if she

knew anything about th' old son-of-a-gun. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," in a tone that meant, "Oh, *everything!*"

"Your own dad told me I ought to go there once in a while to snuff about," he urged, feeling it was quite aside from the point.

"Oh, did he?"

"Yes. When I was to th' jail to see him. I told him 'bout how I had a hunch thataway. Pap Wickson, too, he said I ought to watch out there, too."

"Oh! You men are *all* alike!"

There was no other sound then but the rattle of the wagon, the thud-thud-thud of the ponies' feet as they spurned the furlongs behind them. They came into Coppered Jack ill at ease. Ed was about to alight before the Wickson house to help Berenice down, but she sprang out nimbly and was gone into the house with scarcely a "good night."

"Gol darn you," Ed said to the off pony, as he sent him into the Wickson home lot behind the house, "what d' y' mean by whickerin' at that Mexican nag o' Wickson's? Don't you know you 'll get you'se'f suspected o' bein' a villain dire?"

Two hours later, when Mother Wickson went to bed, she heard the sound of a sob in Berenice's room. She went in and patted the tousled head

gently, bent over and put her arms about the girl, saying soothingly:

"There, Bernie, don't you cry so; yore pap, he 's a-comin' out O. K. Wickson, he ses so, an' he knows what 's what."

"I 'm not worrying about dad — "

"Then what? "

"Oh, nothin', Mother Wickson; I 've just got th' creeps, tha 's all."

"That 's a new name for it, Bernie. They called it by 'nuther name when I was a-courtin' — no, I mean when I was bein' courted by Wickson."

She stooped, kissed the girl and went out softly.

But long after she had gone, the girl remained, face down, sobbing. The proud, handsome face of the Mexican girl, the handsome, goodly face of Burlane kept floating before her mental vision, and they seemed to touch and blend as she strove to banish the visions of her first night of jealous heartache.

CHAPTER XIII

BARNEY PROMISES TO COME!

SWEEPING back toward Ox Bow, Maretta kept her keen eyes on the trail far ahead. So it was that she saw the object of her quest long before he had sighted her. Barney, astride the huge roan, his father's favorite mount, tricked out in a fine outfit of new clothing he had had sent up from San Antone, plenty of money in his pockets, was in high feather that afternoon. He felt that everything was going as he wished. Working through Weaver, Barnum and Maltrane, he had kept up a constant running fire of small talk, indicating public impatience with the slowness of justice and the need for severe punishment against Peters. Toward Burlane he was studiously polite. He hardly noticed Berenice.

So he was feeling sure of himself. He had dismissed Maltrane at noon, intending only to ride about the home grounds of the ranch. After inspecting near-by betterments that he had ordered under way, he had ridden out to the main trail junction.

He had held himself in leash now for days. All the wild urges of his sullen passions were seething inside him, and he was really longing for an opportunity to give vent to his nature's inner stresses. The routine task of browbeating, deceit, domineering had palled on him. Maretta could not have appeared at a better moment.

With the wisdom of her kind, she was about to ride by, seemingly without more than a casual nod, when he touched his horse with spurs and in a moment the roan was beside the white mare. He glanced about. They were alone on the trail. It was safe to spend a few moments in dalliance with the dark-eyed woman whose taunts had worked such a deep influence upon him!

His hand went out to check her mare in. He caught the bridle rein, tugged at it. The little mare, submissive, and hearing also her own rider's voice, slowed. Barnquist pulled the big roan to a walk. The Mexican girl shot a glance of slumberous provocation across the space between their saddles at the new heir of Ox Bow.

"Eet is long, Barnee," she cooed throatily, "dhat I wait to see you."

"Yes, Maretta, but it 's been a busy time for me."

He reached into his pocket with his free hand, leaving the rein slack. He jingled his gold pieces seductively, smiled at her.

"You never thought, when you ragged me

'bout not havin' money, that I 'd be in pap's boots so soon, with oceans of cash money, did you?" he demanded.

"Oh, Barnee, I deed n't theenk so much 'bout dhat monee," she wheedled, eyes alight. "I was justa makin' a joke for you."

"Huh!"

He outthrust his chin, jingled his money again, took up the limp rein. He let go the rein of her mare.

"But you come soon to Chaparral Cock?" she asked softly. "It ees so lonesome dhere, Barnee."

He glanced about. No one was in sight. A short quick gallop, and they would be there. She laughed, letting her eyes flare over his features, on which his raw, callow desire burned fiercely.

"Yes, I 'll come — soon," he agreed, leaning toward her so far that his saddle leather creaked with the strain he put on it in the leaning.

"How soon?" the lure of her coming to him stronger and stronger as she met him halfway by bending toward him with the supple grace of the born horsewoman.

"How soon — "

Her lips, fiery, compelling, swept his; his caution dissolved.

"Now!" and he struck her white mare a smart cut. The white mare bounded forward. The woman's light laughter trailed as the mare made

off before his heavier roan could get into his stride. Then, making of it a merry chase, they went over the trail together, toward the wayside drinking hole.

Glad to be rid of his new employer for a while, tired of being kept close at the heel of the man who fed him, clothed him, armed him and paid him; tired, too, of teaching the seemingly slow heir of Ox Bow the elements of weaponry, Lars Maltrane, yawning, uneasy, fared forth on the main trail, a-fork of his horse, and turned his steed's head toward the Chaparral Cock. He had not had his accustomed toss of *aguardiente* for days; had not bantered with the bar woman there; had not played a hand of poker with some one of the place's habitués. The dead King of Ox Bow had given him stated times off for such relaxation as could be obtained; so far, the new ruler had not seemed to care whether Lars ever rested from his lazy labors of retainership. Maltrane was in one of those moods when his silent nature craved for excitement, — the jog of the unusual.

It was fully dark when he set forth. He let his mount go slowly, and as he rode he fingered his guns, new ones from the Ox Bow armory — a pair of the dead man's that Barney had thought best to give Lars. Maltrane was meditative, his mind running upon the curious fouling of his gun in the fight; his failure to kill Peters, although

his thumb, fanning the hammer, had sped the six shots within the space of a triple heart-beat. He thought over again each detail of the swirling scene, — in vain. It was beyond him. Heretofore he was sure when he shot that that which he aimed at would die. But now —

The lights of the Chaparral Cock shone dimly. With the gunman's usual caution, Lars did not make a direct approach. Sundry exploits there had made him enemies, and it was always best not to take the risk of a direct line of fire! He left his horse, reins on the ground, at a safe distance, sure that the animal would remain where left. He came to the entrance at an angle and brushed past several men who were about the door, evidently concerned with what was going on inside. He heard voices high, angry; one most familiar. He had happened into the midst of a tense little drama that had its beginnings when Barney Barnquist had arrived with Maretta long before:

When the two had ridden up to the Chaparral Cock, Maretta had sent the two horses to be cared for by one of the ubiquitous Mexican *muchachos* hanging about. She had indicated to Barney that for the time being he was to amuse himself about the place, while she, in deference to custom, supervised the early details of the dribble of traffic over the bar and in the kitchen. *Tortillas* and *frijoles, carne* in several modes, were served to Barney at a little table aside from the main

groups, and he relaxed, smoked, jingled his gold. The Mexican habitués of the place drifted in and out. Various games sprang into action, — chuck-aluck, poker, monte. The place was too small for faro, — small in usual traffic. A couple of Mexicans in their steeple hats, little bells a-jingle, began to throw dice softly on one corner of the bar.

Barney, his mind vacant, his senses limp, yearned for some excitement to bridge the present over into the future hours on which he was counting so much. The rattle of the dice caught his ear. He strolled over to the bar and watched the play. Maretta was not behind the bar, her place being taken temporarily by Aguilar, who greeted Barney courteously.

Barnquist always had had a desire to gamble, man-fashion, but owing to his father's policy in keeping ready cash from him, had not been able to gratify his passion. He had played for small stakes with the ranch hands and once had diced in Coppered Jack on credit, only to have his father's heavy hand upon him, when he was discovered at it. And now —

Barnquist shoved forward. Gamecock-like, he was athirst for battle, for big deeds, measured according to his standards. He had been bred to look down upon Mexicans as "mere greasers." That the two dicing there had any rights that he was bound to respect entered not into his head.

He wanted to dice, to sprandle his money on to the bar, to hear it chink.

He shouldered between the two Mexicans, seized the dice box at the end of a cast.

"I 'll play you both," he roughly said, "dollar a throw."

The two Mexicans drew back, seemed about to dispute. A low word from Aguilar made them bow.

"*Si,* Señor," one of them said, signing that he accepted for the two. "Poker dice, shall it be? Why play small? Gold piece against gold piece? One throw to decide each round?"

Barnquist rolled the dice, nodding, one of his gold pieces clanged on to the rough deals of the bar. The Mexican companied Barnquist's yellow bit.

Barney threw two pairs, treys, fours.

The Mexican who had spoken cast, — four fives. He took the money.

Barney threw again. The dice showed a lone pair — fours.

The Mexican cast, sardonic in expression. He had rolled *four fives.* He took the money.

Barney, irritated, snapped the dice from the box again. He showed three deuces. He thought he had won on such a good throw.

The Mexican, smiling blackly, rolled the dice out. He had cast *four fives.*

Barnquist drew back quickly and eyed the two,

who smiled at him so urbanely. They stood, hands on hips, puffing their *cigarros* quietly, their black, beadlike eyes gleaming.

"I don't like men who *all*-ways throw four fives," he snarled. Standing so, he was the great, hulking, clumsy cub, in seeming.

The clack of tongues ceased in the room. Aguilar, smiling evilly, never ceased to puff at his cigarette.

"The Señor will recall dhat wee did not ask heem eento dhtee game," the Mexican spokesman smiled, shifting his weight just a bit.

"What 's that mean?" Barney scowled, bulking over the other angrily.

The Mexican simply puffed, then sent a cloud of smoke toward Barney's convulsed face.

"The *young* Señor has poor manners," he purred.

Aguilar laughed, low, easily. The Mexicans in the room echoed it.

It was at this moment that Lars Maltrane looked in the front door. He saw the tensed bodies before the bar. He saw Barney's outthrust jaw, the silky playfulness of the insulting Mexican. He was on the point of crushing past the human barriers between and taking his place where his salary called him to be, — at the side of his chief in trouble, when —

Barney Barnquist's right hand flowed in even, smooth, snakelike rhythm over to his left hip,

where hung his gun, butt not worn sloppily turned backward as was his usual wont, but turned frontward, in real workmanlike fashion. The two Mexicans started their draw at the same moment, and because their hands were hipped in their seemingly languid pose of set insolence, they appeared to have the better of it. Yet, as Maltrane's eyes bulged, Barnquist had completed his draw; his gun spat, — right, left.

The weapons of the Mexicans spun, shattered, with almost unbelievably accurate shooting; struck from the hands that had held them. Then the gun of Barnquist held the two cringing dark skins at his mercy and, his eyes blazing, he dominated the room. The two so threatened scuttled from the scene, followed by Barnquist's scornful laughter.

Maretta came from behind the bar, having emerged swiftly from the inner room at the first sound of the clash.

"*Basta,*" she shrilled, "what have we? The King of Ox Bow is no boy; he is a man. He has fairly driven two of the worst gamblers of the whole region from our place. They are crooks, throwing cocked dice — "

A murmur of approval greeted her praise of Barney. In another moment Barnquist was ordering drinks for the motley crew and was accepted among them as one worthy of admiration.

Maltrane, amazed, watched the curious scene

to the end. He saw the evident favor the woman was showing to Barney, remembered the young man's former subdued air and foolish attempts at frontier gallantry. And, more, he remembered the hours spent in showing the apparently hulking, slow heir of Ox Bow how to work out the fine points of revolver practice.

He left the neighborhood of the Chaparral Cock, musing. He caught his mount, forked the horse and rode back over the trail to Ox Bow. As he went, he found himself often saying mentally:

"I wonder how that young squirt is able to out-game two hard-boiled Mexican crooks like that at night and not able to get his gun out of its holster in time to hit a tin can that I throw up in the morning?

"An' if so-be he 's such a good actor as seems, what else has he acted out and how and why?"

And again:

"He 'll bear watching — a heap of it. You tread light an' soft an' easy, Lars Maltrane. You went into one J. P. with a gun that only shot dirt. Don't go nosin' into another till you know you 've got real bullets in your gun and why you 're into it, an', furthermo'e, how 's 't a-goin' to end up?"

CHAPTER XIV

A PRISONER OF HOPE

"ATTEND, Maretta!"

It was Aguilar, cap-bells a-jingle, *cigarro* smoke a-curl about his well poised head, hands on hips, as he stood in the quiet of the morning before the bar of the Chaparral Cock. The woman behind the bar was pouting.

"I am attentive, Señor," she gave him, yet in seeming careless inattentiveness. Both were speaking correct Spanish.

"*Attend!*"

His hand flashed out and caught her small, supple wrist. Their eyes engaged in psychic duel. Hers fell — her wrist yielded. He twisted it.

The joint snapped. Her face wreathed in agony. He cast the hurt member aside.

"*Attend!*"

"Si, Señor!" her phrase submissive, her great glowing eyes belying it.

"There, that is better, Señorita *dulce!*"

He puffed smoke toward her, — a cloud of insult that wreathed her face. She coughed. He laughed.

"It was well enough to entice that Barney Barnquist here, for gain," he went on, suave, cool; "but to do it for love, to give him such warmth of greeting and attention — "

"But, Señor, it was your wish to lead him on — "

"There is a limit. Forget not that I, Aguilar, have the first claim on you, Maretta. In business we may do queer things, but once our fortune is made here, we go down into Old Mexico again, to enjoy our money. Now, attend again."

"Si, Señor!"

"In some way procure a bit of the writing of that Burlane who owns the big black *caviard,* that Midnight."

"Why, Señor?"

"It may come well if I have it, that I may forge a bill-of-sale, with Burlane's name as seller, to me — "

"But that would be perilous — "

"In a certain case, yes. But Burlane is opposing the Ox Bow people. Something may happen to him," his mouth wreathed in a cruel smile. "If he should be found on the prairie, dead, and no one wise enough to say how he died; if I were to appear in time with a bill-of-sale, showing I have bought the big horse — it would add a thousand dollars to our wealth, Señorita *dulce.*"

"I understand. You shall have the paper, Pedro."

This softly, caressingly. She leaned over the bar, kissed him lightly on his pouting lips, just covered with a fine black line of well-tended hair. He chucked her under the chin and strode out, humming, "Toreador, make ready!"

As he went, the woman leaned her head on the bar and her eyes glowed. As Aguilar flicked forth into the sunlight, Maretta said to herself:

"Paff, for you, Señor Aguilar! But to draw from that huge Burlane a bit of writing will do no harm, and it will give me the chance to know him better."

Barney Barnquist had been gone for hours. He had left her with the dawn and ridden quietly off toward Ox Bow. The place would be quiet for hours, save for the occasional passers-by. She felt satisfied with the status of their *affaire* and glimpsed, afar, the delights of being mistress of Ox Bow. She thought she had but to humor the man-boy, the new heir, into marriage. The depths of the new cattle prince's passions she had not plumbed; — even his mastery of the gamblers had not opened her eyes. She had wound so many pliant men about her pink-white finger tips that to wind this one more completely seemed easy.

"Paff, for you, Pedro," she said to herself again.

Pending her triumph, she was a prisoner of hope, chained to the four walls of the wayside

joint by the fear of the man whose will, up to a day lately past, had been her master. It was interest and a certain tiger-cat admiration for the suave Mexican that had kept her with him for so long. But now other ideas had entered her handsome head, and her eyes blazed as she pleasured her imagination by pondering upon them.

As he left the barroom, Aguilar first glanced about to make sure that he was not observed. Then he stole away, cat-like, toward the hidden stable where Midnight was.

The Mexican had treated the horse well, — fed and watered him regularly. The stable was roomy, with one window that was so screened by low bushes that it was not discernible to the casual passer-by. The horse at first refused food and even water from the hands of the stranger, but, finding that no harm was done him, he gradually began to drink and eat, when no one was about. Sundry bits of salt and sweets had solaced him, yet every time he felt the hand of the Mexican on his silken coat, Midnight trembled with disgust.

Often he bared his teeth, squealed, kicked. Yet, quick as he was, the experienced horse thief was quicker. Aguilar kept out of the stable and was depending on kindness and usage to make the horse amenable to his will. He did not want to sell the horse injured, broken. He knew the value of the animal and meant to sell him in prime condition, hence his extreme care of Midnight.

As Aguilar edged back the hidden door of the concealed stable, there was a flash of hooves, a squeal. The stallion had kicked at him.

Aguilar, missed by a hair, stepped back and laughed.

"In time, my friend, in time, you will yield," he chuckled. He shut the door, almost, and waited. He talked to Midnight who stood, ears a-cock, listening to those smooth, flowing, nearly lisping tones, seeking in them for sounds that would appeal to him. For in truth, the horse, used to the air, the sun, the tang of wind, was lonesome and anxious for friendly nuzzling, a loved voice to answer his own deep whickering.

Aguilar's voice flowed on and on. The great stallion's head drooped, his eyes paled. He shook a fly from his mane with quick tremors of his shining skin. He stamped with one forefoot, then another.

Aguilar inched the door open, slid inside, talking, crooning, reaching for the nose of the lonely animal. Midnight seemed to drowse.

The soft hand touched the soft nose. At the touch a shiver of hate ran through every fiber of Midnight's being. The feel of the man's cold palm on his own warm nose brought into the animal's memory the agony of the constricting rope, the heavy fall, the long, blind, fearsome walk over the prairie.

Midnight became a whirlwind of anger. His

head went up. He blared in rage, lashed out before and behind. Aguilar, caught off-guard, yet had wit enough not to dash for the door, but into a corner. The stallion whirled, as if on a pivot, sought his foe in the dark space and missed him, for the agile Mexican slid, viper-like, from gloom to light and, flicking loose the guard chain, was outside before the stallion could wheel again in that narrow, pent-up stable. Aguilar barely had time to turn and draw the door to, when the thrumming hooves crashed against its timbers and the stallion's squeals told of his rage and disappointment over his lack of success.

Aguilar stood outside for a moment, his face scowling. Then he smoothed the scowl from his features and smiled.

"All the better, when you do become mine," he said to himself. Then, puffing calmly at a fresh *cigarro,* Pedro went toward the Chaparral Cock again. There he ordered a trusted peon to take water and feed to the stallion, hoping by keeping away himself that the big black would quiet down and forget him.

Behind the well concealed door Midnight stood, alert. His eyes blazed for a time, then paled. His head drooped. The wan light from the window was dispiriting. He shifted about, shook himself, and then stood, the picture of equine dejection. All his great heart was yearning for one thing and one thing only, — the touch

of a loved hand on his velvety muzzle; the sound of a loved voice that, in answer to his deep-chested whicker, would say:

"Darned ol' son-of-a-gun, you, *Midnight!*"

Early the next morning, when Burlane appeared for his usual call at the Wickson place, he found gaunt Pop Wickson out behind the house, busy at some chores. Burlane sat himself down upon an upturned tub close to the rear door of the house, smoked, idled.

A whisk of shimmering hair near the back window, a half-mouthed phrase by Berenice to Ma Wickson, told Ed that the girl was inside, combing her braids, hairpins in full-lipped mouth. He had caught several glimpses of her so upon fortunate occasions when the door had been swung ajar by Ma Wickson, issuing from her domain to give orders to Pa.

This morning Ed was not hoping for a distracting glimpse of Berenice after that fashion. He wanted to be justified. And not mechanically, end-on, but casually, as if naturally. He had planned the scene with deep cunning, according to his own estimation.

"Anything on you' mind, son?" Pop mildly inquired.

"Who? Me?" Ed answered, making sure that a certain pair of shell-pink ears were listening through the crack of the ajar door. Side-

wise he had caught a hint of her presence inside,— just where he wanted her to be.

"Why, yas, son, I was p'intin' my mind towa'd you-all."

Pop grinned at Ed, friendly-wise.

"Well, no, Pop, unless I might hitch up those ponies an' have them skulldrag that buckboard out to Twin Springs."

"Better do that thing t'day, son," coming to the step to sit down with Ed and light his pipe. This suited Ed exactly.

"Say, Pop," with what Ed judged to be absence of guile, "you remember how you told me th' other day I ought to keep an eye on that Mexican fire-water joint — th' Chaparral Cock — for news of Midnight?"

"Why, yes, son, what 'bout it?"

"That Mexican woman from down there spoke to me on th' trail yesterday evenin', and she 'lowed she wanted to see me again soon."

"Well, son, you 're of age, full age," Pop puffed. "She 's a bad un, that Maretta is. But if you c'n get any news out o' her, you git it. No tellin' what she might say to a handsome man —"

There was a scrape of a chair inside. Ed caught, through the door's crack, the flirt of a disappearing skirt.

"What 's matter wi' your face, son?" Pop asked in surprise; "you lookin' like a boiled owl

soured on his wife's relations. Dawggone it. I ain't said nothin', have I?"

"Not a darn thing, Pop," and Ed got up. "Well, s' long; I 'm goin' to drive out to Twin Springs, and after that I 'm goin' to ride out to the Chaparral Cock to quiz Maretta."

"Pop, he came 'long noble until th' climacterical point," Ed confided to the off buckboard pony as he harnessed him a few moments later; "he meant well, but he did n't tip off th' hand I played right through. If he 'd left off that 'handsome man' part an' just let her know, casual like, that he 'd urged me to play that bar lady for news, it would have been O. K."

He sagged onto the buckboard's seat, tooled the ponies to the front of the Wickson house. Here he called:

"Ho, Miss Berenice. C'm on out, an' we 'll ride out to th' Springs. It 's our day to."

A large and profound silence followed. Ed called again. Again. The off pony twitched his ears.

Ed exploded at him:

"Whoa, there, you onery, mealy-mouthed humdinger!"

Ma Wickson stuck her head out of the front door to call:

"Miss Berenice says she can't go t'day, Mr. Burlane. Got a headache."

"Gid-ap!"

Burlane started the ponies, that soon were careering through Coppered Jack as if going out to win a steeplechase, the buckboard bobbing wildly behind them.

Berenice came down, listless, aimless. Ma Wickson packed a basket of lunch for her father. The girl took it and came back soon distraught. She kept silence most of the time Ed was away. Soon after he turned the ponies out again, after he had left word that Twin Springs was in good condition, Burlane found it expedient to take himself off. The girl was plainly ill at ease in his presence.

Ed forked the Wickson cayuse and joggled off toward the Chaparral Cock. Before going he mentioned his errand several times in a loud tone to Pop, laying down what he deemed to be a perfectly reasonable alibi. He played the part, however, a bit too well. No adept at outright deceit, the appearance of being engaged in it confused the range rider, and he made a bad job of it. And Berenice, listening, sensed deceit. For some time after he had gone, she remained in the Wickson kitchen, assisting Mother Wickson with her baking. That out of the way, she sat near the back window.

"A penny for your thoughts!" Mrs. Wickson bid, putting the last touches on a heap of pone, ready against the coming dinner time. "Oh, I wish Mr. Burlane had n't gone away, my

dear. I wanted him to enjoy some o' my pones. He always eats like a man who would be easy to manage."

Having shot this rather broad hint at Berenice, Ma Wickson smiled slyly to herself.

"Yes," snapped Berenice, whisking her head about, "yes, like all the rest. Feed them. Faugh!"

"Hoity, toity, madam!" Ma Wickson snorted, getting up from her comfortable half-barrel chair with the steer-hide seat; "you must be cross-grained t'day?"

"Oh, Ma Wickson, not at you —"

Ma Wickson wisely held her tongue. Silence now. The kettle bubbled; the oven gave forth grateful odors from a crack in the door that had a tendency to bulge away from the face of the fireplace.

"Ma Wickson," Berenice was facing her squarely now, "tell me right out, what sort of a woman is that Maretta at the Chaparral Cock —"

Ma Wickson's hands went up in protest.

"For the land's sake! Now what —"

"I want to know."

"W' for?"

"Never you mind, Ma. I got reasons. Is she — a — a — a — hussy!"

Ma Wickson pursed her comfortable lips, blew out a scathing breath:

"You might add something on to that yet."

"Oh."

Silence again. After a long, long time:

"Ma Wickson?"

"Well, Ber'nice."

"I 'm goin' to hitch up those buckboard ponies. They ain't had 'nuff exercise lately."

"I ain't noticed they was a-dyin' for it."

Silence again. The kettle talked; the oven gave out its fragrance. Pa Wickson, whistling out behind the house, split the stillness with a few melancholy bars of "Jesse James."

"Well, Ma, never mind that. I 'm goin' to hitch them up an' drive them out this afternoon. Please come 'long; will you, Ma?"

Ma Wickson looked at the girl. Her deep knowledge of people often had stood her in good stead. She sensed something unusual, — that Berenice needed her. Motherlike, she yearned to be of use to the girl whom chance had placed under her protecting wing.

"Why, yes, Ber'nice," she said softly; "I dunno what 's in your pretty head, but I 'll go for a drive with you, any time."

"Oh," and the pretty head went over against the broad, comfortable bosom, "thank you, Ma Wickson; we 'll go right after dinner."

CHAPTER XV

AT THE CHAPARRAL COCK

BURLANE'S ride to the Chaparral Cock was anything but cheerful.

Firstly, the Wickson cayuse, sober, steady, a bit nagging in his gait, was so different from huge Midnight, with his pretty *pasears,* deep-chested whickerings, prancings, friendly-wise nods of loyal head.

Secondly, confound it, there was Berenice! She had misunderstood his reasons for wishing to talk to Maretta. Hang girls, anyway!

Thirdly, there was the Mexican girl, bold, over-ready, but who might, in some way known to her breed and calling, come at knowledge of Midnight's whereabouts.

The afternoon was drowsing to a heated climax. The trail was over-hot; dust puffs whiffed up from under the cayuse's hooves. Ed got past the Ox Bow turn-off without meeting any one. He let the cayuse amble. He descried the Chaparral Cock soon afterwards and reined the steady cayuse in.

Mid-afternoon sloth reigned in the place. The cayuse, head a-nod, knees all but unsprung, promptly dozed as soon as Ed had aligned him with the tie-rack. Inside there was only Maretta, behind the bar, seemingly asleep, her head on her crossed arms that were on the deals. Her lately fired cigarette sent up a spiral of blue vapor — last flicker of its fire. That, even, ceased, as Ed stepped softly over the sill.

He paused a moment to glance at the woman, so ripe, so potent for heartache to men of fiery passions. He noted the little pursing of the full, red lips at each breath's outgoing, the way in which the lips drew in tenderly at each intake. Her glossy hair, in seeming disarray, was over one rounded arm.

She stirred, straightened indolently, yawned, brushed her eyes, then put her hair back with a pettish gesture. Not until then did she deign to notice that Ed was standing in mid-room, looking at her, smiling.

Instead of playing the prude and pretending confusion, she merely flashed him a happy smile, in which each of her pretty teeth did its duty. Then she signed him to approach and, with a quick, supple bending of arm and body, swung her rebellious hair into place.

"Dhere, Señor," she gave him; "dhat hair, so sau*cee*, she is what your 'Mericano girls say? Done up?"

"Tha 's it," Ed laughed, sidling easily to the bar and ordering a wee drink. She joined him. They lighted weeds and puffed across the bar.

"You wanted that I 'd come out this-a-way?" Ed queried.

"Yees, Señor," low, evenly, deep in her full chest.

"'Cause why? Heard or seen anything?"

His interest was keen, unmistakable.

She blew a pretty double smoke ring at the end of his nose. Ed, with Midnight in mind, laughed.

"Yees, no," she teased.

"Come, sister," Ed urged. "Let 's know th' worst."

"A 'm 'fraid — eet eesa deefeecult," she procrastinated.

"Eh?" his level eyes studying her. . . .

"A 'm 'sham*eed,* Señor, for tell you."

"Aw, now, sister. . . ."

"A 'm not a writer —"

"What 's that —"

"A 'm wanting you wreete me a — a letter — I sign weeith my mark, eh, Señor?"

The relieved expression on her face at having gotten out that artful confession of ignorance was matched by Ed's as he realized the reason, it seemed, for her long preamble. He knew few of the border Mexican folk, women especially, could write or read, and that she should want him

to write a letter for her was reasonable. That it might contain something she would not want to expose to the ribaldry of the casual barroom hangers-on he could appreciate. It had been a proper bit of acting on her part, and it removed every bit of doubt from the mind of the range rider.

Up to that moment Ed had been divided in his mind between the feeling that she was going to try to play some barroom woman's trick on him and a genuine yearning to humor her into giving him news of old Midnight. Now a way seemed to open to work into her good graces in a purely legitimate way. Ed was inclined always to be chivalrous to women, no matter of what class or creed, and Maretta's pretty confession of ignorance of writing was made in just the right way to enlist his sympathy.

"Sure," he said heartily; "hand me th' ink, pen and paper, an' I 'll write what you say."

She speedily produced a stuttering pen, a bottle of semi-fluid ink, some time-browned paper. Ed grasped the unfamiliar implement, dipped its nib, made a preliminary flourish — the pen stuttered and one sheet was spoiled.

The woman made a pretty moue of mock annoyance and tore up the spoiled sheet.

"*Encore!*" she urged.

"No, not that-a-way," Ed said, puckering his brows. He dipped the nib anew, squared him-

self, and, at her dictation, wrote in a labored hand:

"My friend, that I send you with this, may be trusted. Treat him well. I am well and happy. Ten thousand blessings.

Gracioso Dio!"

"Who 's it to?" Ed demanded, poising his pen to fill in the neglected name and salutation.

"Oh, a freend, just-a freend. Now, you sign, Señor, and A 'm makin' my mark."

With a flourish Ed signed her name. She seized the penholder and made her tiny (X) mark after the name and before it, then thanked him.

"A 'm askeeing dhat a friend," she explained, "have a job off down Vernon way."

"Oh."

"Yes, Señor, and my thanks to you, Señor, thousand times."

"Never mind, sister, now, you heard anything about my hoss?"

Her eyes were wide in sincere sympathy.

"Notheeng do I hear, Señor. But eef I do —"

Her gesture indicated that she would let him know.

Ed's face fell. He had hoped that perhaps, at the end, she would, from her scattered stores of information, bring forth some hint, some

phrase of enlightenment. But he read nothing hopeful in her face.

Leaving the writing materials on the bar, he said:

"Well, sister, I 'm ramblin' now. S'long!"

"*Buenos jornado,*" she cooed.

He heard the paper crisply rattle.

Outside he found the Wickson cayuse drowsing, heedless of flies and the sun's lances, now showering low against the tie-rack's sides. Ed whiffed the reins taut and set foot to stirrup. The sleepy horse sagged under the wonted burden, then came to equilibrium as the rider forked neatly and came to rest astride.

Off up-trail there was a rattle of familiar wheels. Ed was stretching his neck to scan the newcomers when he heard behind him:

"Señor, a mo-*ment.*"

Maretta was at his saddle's side, holding up paper and dipped pen.

"One word, add," she coaxed, smiling up.

"Say it," he said, anxious to be away. The jangle of that buckboard out beyond was familiar. One he knew had a terrible rattle to it

The Mexican woman here caught the so of the wheels. She was facing the trail; s maneuvered Ed so his back was toward had run after him merely to gratify wayward impulses, her desire for The proximity of the big range

her wild nature's very depths, and she was glowing with a yearning to possess, to fondle —

Ed made a fairly stiff pad of the sheet by doubling it back on to itself until he had the bottom of it, under the signature, ready for a dictated postscript, that, the cayuse remaining quiet, he waited for. She spoke:

" My freend, he is my eespeecial freend, please to attend."

Ed jotted this down mechanically. The buckboard out there jangled and rattled.

" Here, sister," and Ed reached down pen and paper.

The sleepy old cayuse drowsed. The buckboard rattled, its familiar syncopation cutting into the peace of Ed's thoughts like a strophe of recurrent pain.

Maretta reached up for the materials. She could see the buckboard plainly now — the face of the girl driving it, and the jealousy on that face. The spirit of mischief, of evil, swept over the Mexican woman.

She took the pen, made a pretty pretense of missing the paper, had to reach for it, managed to prick the sleepy cayuse with the pen. Amazed, that old sinner pranced, — and the paper she did not grasp, so she had to reach again. Ed, to help her, bent far over in the saddle; their heads came together for just a heartbeat; then she had the paper. Ed, his face flushed from

bending, from the contact of cheek against hot cheek, swirled the cayuse around and, raising his hand in salute, spurred for the trail. Maretta whisked indoors, in well-planned confusion.

The buckboard ponies, recognizing the Wickson cayuse, whickered and the sleepy old creature whickered back. Ed, feeling that crimson tides were ebbing and flowing over face and partly bared neck, was very uncomfortable as he swung alongside.

Berenice, her face drawn, icy, did not respond to his greeting, although he humbly swept low his wide-brim over his saddle's horn. He turned to Ma Wickson, whose comfortable body joggled about with the sway of the jolting vehicle.

"Oh, I say, Mrs. Wickson," Ed pleaded, after he had noted the angle at which that usually friendly person's nose was tiptilted away from him; "I say, Mother Wickson, what 's up?"

"I do declare, Ed Burlane," she burst out, as cayuse and ponies exchanged news by means of friendly-wise horse-talk; "I never 'd thought it o' *you* if I 'd not seen it with my own personal eyes."

"Seen what?"

Ed's tone was wild, his eye wilder.

"Seen what? An' this here girl a-breakin' her hea —"

"Mrs. Wickson!"

Berenice's voice, like a clash of supple, steely

blade, cut into the soft flow of the other's indignation.

"Well, it 's true — "

"Mrs. Wickson!"

Again Berenice headed off the other. She hit the off pony a vicious cut with her whip, then the other. The ponies, astounded, bolted.

Ed jammed spurs to the sleepy cayuse which, likewise taken unaware, made a wild *pasear* off-trail, then lumbered to retrieve his vantage point against the withers of the pair, that he might resume his interrupted question.

"Here, what 's wrong?" Ed pleaded, when he had reëstablished himself beside the buckboard.

"I declare, Ed Burlane," Mrs. Wickson began —

"Declare, then," Ed bawled; "but what is it all about?"

Berenice turned in her seat and looked him squarely in the face.

"A man who kisses a wayside bar girl," she snapped, "would do well to keep away from me, sir."

Open-mouthed, Ed watched her lash the ponies into a canter. The buckboard, with Mrs. Wickson hanging on to the jouncing seat, swung and bumped. Soon they had gone from Ed's sight, over a rise in the land, on the way toward Coppered Jack.

"Dawggone it," Ed confided to the sleepy cayuse's left ear, "I might 's well kissed her, at that, as be accused of doing it and not getting the kiss. Darn a girl, anyway!"

He set spurs to the cayuse and coaxed a canter out of him. As he lagged toward Coppered Jack, Maretta, from her place behind one of the window spaces of the Chaparral Cock, peeped forth and waved a kiss at his receding back. To Aguilar, who came in presently, she gave the note Ed had written for her, and he took it into her cubby behind the bar and began, in odd moments, to work on a forged bill of sale, purporting to transfer Midnight from Burlane to himself for a goodly sum.

Silently intent, Berenice drove the ponies into the town and put them out. Ed did not appear for supper and the meal was eaten in silence. Once Ma Wickson ventured to speak to Pa of what had happened. He defended Ed by saying that he, indeed, had urged Ed to see the Mexican girl on account of Midnight.

"But not to kiss her," Berenice snapped, her face like flames.

"How fierce our cat is to-night," Ma consoled, drinking the dregs of her tea and setting the empty cup down noisily.

"I don't care!" Berenice exploded. "I saw him."

"Well, what o' that? In dealin' with men,

Bernie, you take my advice. Don't believe anything you hear o' them and on'y half you see. Then you 'll be happy, though married."

With which piece of sage advice she lumbered about the room, preparing to "do up" the supper work. Presently she glanced about. The girl was gone.

"Went to her dad, at th' calaboose; said she wanted to cheer him up," Pa Wickson said.

"Best place for her," Ma said, waving her dish towel at an intruding fly buzzing in the early lamplight. "I saw Ed Burlane bend over that greaser hussy, an' by all good rights he was a-kissin' her, an' she 's handsome 'nuff to excuse sich doin's, but though I saw him do it, I don't believe my own eyes. He 's not that kind o' a harpen!"

"You said a mouthful then, Ma," Pa agreed.

"You shet right up, Pa Wickson," she flared at him, bouncing to the door leading upstairs; "you men allus stand together."

Pa Wickson's face went blank. He got out his old pipe, filled it, lighted it, sat down heavily on the doorsill outside. There was a stir in the open space beside the house; Ed came softly around.

"Hist, Young Timer," Pop said, puffing peacefully. "You tread light; you 're in disgrace here."

"Why?" Ed demanded, but softly.

"I 'll tell you," and he did.

Ed laughed sheepishly and went over his side of the affair.

"Sounds mighty nice, but somehow it lacks what the poet might call versimiltude," Pop laughed. "You lay low, Young Timer, on that trail, till this blows over a bit. I 'll stick up for you to Ma, an' you watch a chance to explain to the girl. One thing 's sure — Berenice must o' had a notion towa'd you, or she 'd not been mad if you kissed fifty greaser fire-water sellers."

"By *thunder!*"

So Ed, bouncing upright. Pop looked at him amazedly.

"She must think something of me, tha 's a fact," Ed was joyous.

"Yes," Pop said soberly, "but now she 's thinking *about* you, in thinks not loud but deep. Next time you want to call on a Mexican bar lady, you manage it all in th' dark, Young Timer."

"I will," said Ed fervently.

CHAPTER XVI

MALTRANE WONDERS AGAIN

With inborn cunning, Barney Barnquist, as soon as the glamour of his adventure in the Chaparral Cock, his first care-free fling as a ruthless man of the sort he had always secretly admired, had worn thin, remembered what the possible effects might be to him later. For whereas up to that time he had been simply a hulking, somewhat surly son of a man of means, he now was the heir, the man able to awe a barroom full of bad men, the Lothario of the roadside *aguardiente* joint. That the news would travel and lose nothing in the travels it was sent on by gossiping tongues he had no doubts.

But the sense of growing power, the sweep of egoism following his exploits with gun and gold, with bad man and bad woman, elated him. All the naturally evil traits of his nature expanded, dilated. They filled his coarse being, and yet his inherited shrewdness whispered, with an inner caution, against too great a degree of confidence in mere chance.

The work of the big ranch was going forward

carefully, driven by Pardee, who, anxious to retain his old-time place and prestige, managed well. Barney had too much hard sense to interfere in that and knew that as long as he let Pardee alone, Ox Bow would flourish.

Barney had, however, three cares eating away at the back of his mind: Greasewood Kate's threat of producing a will; Maltrane's actions when he came to discuss Barney's worsting of the Mexican gamblers, as he was bound to do in time when the Mexican spectators of the scene had talked it about, gossip-wise; Barnum and his discovery that the dirt on the bar mirror was akin to that on Maltrane's badly fouled gun.

At the first claim by Greasewood Kate that she knew of a will, Barney had written to his father's attorneys in Vernon, Blackwell and Storton, advising them duly of his father's death and of his temporary assumption of full heirship. He had asked them if a will had been drawn and to make inquiries of any of his father's old-time friends among retired cattlemen there who would be apt to know of such a document.

So it was with relief that three days after the exploit in the Chaparral Cock Barney received a letter informing him that so far as Blackwell and Storton knew, no will had been made out by the dead man. And the firm did not know of a will; had drawn none for Barnquist at any time, they reported.

Armed with this definite information, Barney decided to have done with one of his worries. If Maretta Esquiemala were to be installed as nominal housekeeper at Ox Bow, his then plan, the rugged decency and honesty of Greasewood Kate would have to be dispensed with.

So it happened, on a morning a few days afterward, that the half-breed woman, busy with her duties of overseeing the Mexican servants, received a call to attend in the room that did for the ranch's "office."

She hastened there, her somewhat heavy face anxious, for she felt that the call presaged friction of some sort, as Barney of late had taken to hectoring and oversetting long-established household customs in the new fervor of asserting his authority.

Kate came into the room to find Barney seated before the rough desk. On chairs at the rear of the room were Barnum and Maltrane. The grim gunman and Kate exchanged crisp nods, for she, like him, had been so long at Ox Bow that each was part of the fixtures of the place.

Barnum, the newcomer to the big ranch, she did not deign to notice. The breed woman, who before the death of Barnquist the elder had kept the ranch hands' time in a rough and just way and attended to other like duties, resented the bringing of Barnum to the ranch for no other purpose than to do the slight tasks that to her

mind were mere routine, unworthy of a man's attention.

"Kate," Barney began with disconcerting suddenness, "I wanta know 'bout that will."

The breed woman started back, glancing at each hostile face in turn. Her gaze lingered longest on that of Maltrane, and in it she found a flicker of yielding.

"I 've told the men here," Barney continued, "that you claimed to know of a will. Now, I 've *proof* there is none; never was one."

The woman plainly was confused by this direct attack. She hung her head, then raised it and shot angry glances at Barney, who grinned wolfishly.

Kate fingered the folds of her coarse linsey-woolsey work dress. Again she studied the faces of the two spectators. That of Barnum was set, hostile. That of Maltrane was less hostile, yet his agate eyes had a glint of deeper meaning in them.

"Come, speak out, Kate," Barney's voice came, commanding, ringing with assurance.

Maltrane stirred and snapped erect. He waved his hand toward his vacated chair. "Sit down — here."

She shot him a glance of mingled gratitude and puzzlement, for never before had Maltrane made even an attempt toward courtesy to a woman on the ranch. Barnquist frowned and

nursed his upper lip, where some day a real hirsute adornment would be. Now it was but a promise of what would come when the fuller tide of Barnquist life should burgeon in him.

"No stage plays, Mal," Barnquist grated; then to Kate again:

"Come, what about th' will? Is there one, or no?"

She remained silent. She did not sit down.

"I 'm makin' one guess and tha 's all," Barnquist persisted; "you were usin' th' will, thinkin' I 'd be scared? You used it, like, to try to keep me in line with Ess-Way? Was that it? Playin' to make you' girl safe?"

She was grimly silent, her stubbed, patient fingers working at the folds of her dress. Her head down. She seemed daunted.

"Come, come, own up," Barney went on, relentless; "you thought you 'd make me knuckle; make me keep sweet on that little house-cat I 've played wi' since we were kids together — "

"BAR*NEE!*"

Her head snapped erect. Her hands ceased their play with the old, worn dress. Barnum grinned, guffawed. Maltrane turned on him with an oath.

Barnquist caught something in the tone of her that stirred him out of his easy, overbearing demeanor.

"Well?" he snarled, with a new access of de-

termination, put on to hide his underlying uneasiness.

"Youa estop," the breed woman ordered, one long arm flailing out, an accusing forefinger pointed at him; "you best not call my girl bad nahmes, Bar*nee*."

"But you lied 'bout th' will to keep me in line wit' her?"

"Yes," with growing intensity, "I lie 'bout will, Bar*nee*. Why so? 'Fraid you goin' not mar*ee* my girl, Ess-Way, Bar*nee*. You all taime lie, lie, lie, f'om kid up, Bar*nee*. I 'm think eef you makin' some love to her again, you 'll mar*ee* her, what she wants —"

"Marry! Her? Good enough for a kid plaything, but marry —"

The breed's eyes blazed.

"You take th' girl, an' you git off'n Ox Bow, *poco pronto,* do you hear?" the cattle princeling bellowed.

"Yes, I 'm hearin' you, Bar*nee*," came the level, menacing answer. "I 'm been here years, for your fadther, he made me housekeep. Ol' Bart, he was bad man, some ways. He kill, he steal cattle, yes. He make quarrel, he make Mal kill. But one t'ing he was — a friend to friend. You —" her voice went up to a scream — "you bad — all bad, to friend, to enemy. Pagh!"

She spat —

The defiled face of the heir went white. He

wiped off the spittle with shaking hands. His hand flew to gun-butt. He surged upright.

"Not thataway! Not to a woman, breed or none!" Maltrane had his hand in a firm grasp.

The door slammed. The breed woman was gone.

"She — she r'iled me," Barney said, his hand, futile, dropping from his gun.

"'Nuff to r'ile any one," Barnum cut in, with like acid.

"Yes," and Maltrane's thin-browed eyes narrowed as he fixed the other in his intent gaze; "yes, but not thataway to a woman, breed or none."

"Gettin' soft — under th' hat?" Barney growled.

"I 'm 'bout this soft, Barnquist, that I stick by them that sticks by me. I wonder, by hell, how far you 'd subscribe to sich doctrine?"

Without a word farther he whipped around on his heel and went out.

Barnquist and Barnum, sitting there in silence, soon heard a stir in the ranch yard. There was a clack of Mexican tongues as the servants of the lesser sorts came filing out; they caught the words of farewell.

The ranch's buckboard was there, harnessed. On the seat was Greasewood Kate, silent, face immobile. Seated on her dunnage, strapped on behind, was Ess-Way, her eyes ringed from

grief. The girl clung to some of the straps as the harness was being cinched on to the ponies. The driver came from the bunkhouse, — Lars Maltrane.

There was a rattle of wheels, and the buckboard had gone. Barney sent out to make an inquiry, and Barnum brought back word that Kate had told the servants she was going to Coppered Jack to work in one of the eating houses there, giving no reason for quitting her place.

"There 's another goin' soon," Barnquist stormed to Barnum, when he had heard the hireling's report; "an' tha 's Lars Maltrane. I fired Kate so 't I 'd be boss inside my own house, an' I 'll have to get rid o' Mal so 't I 'll be boss outdoors. No man c'n ride herd on this ranch crowd *all*-ways behind another geezer's gun."

Barnum salved his pride with a chuckle of approval. He was glad to have the straight-seeing breed woman gone, so that he could have free rein with books and petty cash, the ordering of supplies, the doling of them out to the hands.

"You count on me to back your play in such a case," he soothed.

"I 'll count on you," Barnquist gave him heartily. But behind the veil of his inner thoughts he was thinking, — "and after Mal, you! Mebbe your turn 'll be fi'st."

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT BERENICE SAW

BERENICE, uneasy, haunted by a sense of the possible injustice she had done to Ed Burlane, too proud to make an excuse for telling him her real feelings, too unskilled in affairs of the heart to know how to make the first advances, spent some miserable days and nights.

There were times when she heard the range rider's even, vibrant voice as he talked with Pa Wickson about the yard of the Wickson place, and then she had a catch of longing at her heart. And when Ed went by her window, whistling and even humming with assumed gaiety, she felt his seeming good humor as a stab of pain.

"How can he be so happy — when I 'm not?" she found herself asking, in vain. She quite forgot that she had not let him see that she was not happy, for she kept a brave exterior. So each, bent upon making the other feel that their disagreement was a trivial matter, really suffered internally.

Ed went to the jail with tobacco and other things he judged Peters would need. He ren-

dered an accurate account of the state of Twin Springs to the prisoner, and together they discussed the aspects of his case.

Public opinion continued well balanced. Barnquist, dropping a word here and there among the younger element, kept the flame of suspicion against Peters burning; the old-timers combated this fire. The inquest yet loomed. Harvison and Alberstone seemed to have disappeared from the horizon of justice, sundry hold-ups, horse thieveries and killings keeping them "busy" elsewhere.

It was while matters were in such poise that Berenice began to ride out in the long sun-shot afternoons, from sheer weariness of mind and soul. Such casual attentions as the youngsters of the town attempted to pay her she put aside with the disdain of the true woman for the attentions of those she has already estimated as of little worth. Beside them all the big range rider bulked, appealing, calm, a man-size man, a man to make a real woman happy!

Often as she rode she found herself wondering about old Midnight, and at such times floods of sympathy for Ed would sweep over her. By comparison with the big black stallion she had once ridden so happily, her own saddle pony, that she had brought in from the Springs, seemed stale, vapid. The recollection of the glorious, sweeping gallop she had had on Midnight's back

was to her a tonic every time she reverted to it in rose-dream thoughts, and its close, when she had ridden up to Burlane, the gold bead of her rosary of past pleasures.

Riding out so, Berenice, on the day that Barnquist dismissed Greasewood Kate, passed the buckboard in which was the breed woman. Berenice nodded to her and waved her hand to the Indian's girl, on the dunnage behind the racketing seat of the bumping vehicle. Maltrane, stonily erect, paid no attention to her, save to sweep her once with his chilly eyes.

Past the side trail to Ox Bow the girl let the pony lope. Although she told herself there was nothing planned about her present trip, really it was the culmination of the others, for far underneath was the thought:

"If I could see the woman at the Chaparral Cock! What sort of woman is she?"

It was a girl's natural jealousy, in curious outworking. She refused to admit to herself that such a woman as the wayside *aguardiente* seller could compete with her in a fair woman's war for a man, but she wanted, at the same time, to see the other close at hand, — and be sure.

But once down the trail a way her natural plains-born caution came to the surface. It would never do for her, she knew, to ride boldly to the place, — where such as she had no business to be.

She twitched the good little pony off the trail and struck off across country. Far out back of the *aguardiente* shack she rode, apparently in aimless ramblings. Twice or thrice she dismounted to pick some prairie flowers and make of them a gay wisp for her belt and hatband. This was such a plausible excuse for her riding thus that it would divert the attention of any chance observer, she thought.

Letting the pony amble without an apparent purpose, but really adroitly drifting him to a position behind the Chaparral Cock, she began to work back toward the trail, hoping to pass near enough to see the Mexican woman through door or window or in the open, about the joint. For her personal safety so far as the Mexicans were concerned, she had no fears. In those days and times, the Mexican who lifted up unbidden eyes to a daughter of the soil ceased to exist, and under the ægis of that stern code the girls of Texas rode far and wide, unafraid, unless of the few wolves of their own race, who are apt to appear in all ranks and walks of human society in cities or in wildernesses, throw-backs from the norm of male chivalry.

The land was more rolling than common out there, and there was a spring, small but well known locally, where Berenice was counting on getting water for herself and the pony. Berenice descried the hackberries about the spring just

as the earliest dusk was coming. The pony, sniffing the water afar, began to prance. She let him have his way and soon was drawing closer to the spring that was in the bottom of an otherwise dry draw between two high rolls of prairie.

She left the pony to his own devices after she had alighted, drank herself and remounted. The rein was slack, and the pony fussed with the water after he was replete. Deep in meditations tinged with unpleasantness, Berenice was thrilled of a sudden to hear, seemingly afar but oddly anear, the rumble of a deep-toned whicker.

The pony answered.

Again she heard it, — that deep-toned whicker. There could be but one such!

But where was the animal that had made the sound?

She was beginning to gaze about, to twitch the pony away, that she might begin a tour of exploration, when she saw, afar, a man approaching. She saw it was a Mexican, — knew him for Aguilar, the Chaparral Cock's familiar spirit of evil.

In absence of secure knowledge of the exact whereabouts of the stallion, if indeed it were Midnight that she had heard and not some other horse near the Chaparral Cock, Berenice decided quickly to assume indifference. She forced the pony slowly about, as if she were just on the point

of leaving because her mount had finished his drink, and rode toward Aguilar, easily, naturally. She passed the sleepy-eyed Mexican, who gave her a deferential bow in response to her distant nod, and rode toward the main trail with just the right degree of languor. All together, to Aguilar's mind, she was just one who had turned aside to get water for herself and horse. And after she had passed and he had hastened to the concealed stable in the middle of the hackberry clump, in the swell of the dry draw's side, where Midnight was hidden, Aguilar found the ventilating hole that did service for window partly ajar. But he attached no importance to that, as the girl's acting had been so perfect that it would have taken a keener man than Aguilar to discover its ultimate purpose, even had he sensed it in the least.

But Berenice, breathing more freely, set the little pony along the path down which Aguilar had come toward the spring. It would take her close to the Chaparral Cock—just what she desired.

Approaching the place, she reined in the pony and spoke soothing words. The little fellow slowed easily, his hooves making scarcely a sound on the soft grass beside the path on to which she twitched him with intent purpose to deaden the sound of his feet.

Opposite that window of the Chaparral Cock

that lighted the bar, the girl stopped the pony and gazed through the aperture.

Leaning over the bar was Maretta Esquiemala, her lips pursed for a kiss. A hand on each shoulder, drawing her forward to get the kiss was — Barney Barnquist.

Berenice cut the pony sharply, and he dashed for the main trail. She had a fleeting, over-shoulder glimpse of Barnquist at the window, summoned by the noise of her going, but she cared not for that. She had seen something so different from what her jealous thoughts had made her fear she might see that her heart was singing within her. And, atop that, was the thought of the whicker of the horse with the deep chest-tones.

Suffused with the beguiling glow of such thoughts, the girl let the pony go as he pleased and came to herself at the end of a happy, peaceful hour, with night over her, the kindly stars beaming down the coolness of the evening, and the trail clearly lost. But that did not worry the daughter of the plains. She simply turned the pony and let him wander back toward the trail, confident that he would find it in due time.

The moon came up, argent, wonderful. Berenice, riding in the glowing radiance, sang softly:

> When I hear his saddle leather creak,
> Oh, it makes my heart grow weak;
> And when his spurs go jingle-jingle,
> I wonder if I 'll keep on — single.

The glimpse Barnquist had caught of the girl riding away from the Chaparral Cock had been too fleeting to give him cognizance of her identity. He had returned to Maretta, laughing and jingling his money. Together they drank and gossiped, bantered and made pretense of quarreling. Barnquist, luxuriating in his first open affair with a woman, yet had the inborn distrust of others that kept him from giving the bar-woman his absolute confidence. Feeling this, Maretta had tried again and again to break down his last fibers of inner reserve, but in vain. She was too experienced in the ways of men not to know that Barney was keeping something back from her — something of trust and good will — and as their *affaire* had progressed she had found the precocious heir of Ox Bow growing beyond her in depth and force of passion and control. That irked her, and she had that day tried her best to become mistress of his inmost citadel of desires, but in vain. At the end of their hour of outward gaiety she had to acknowledge to herself that Barnquist was farther from under her control than ever, and she was irritated, distrait.

"Clearly," she thought, "the way to Ox Bow lies not on the trail I am using. I have been overbold, too open with him. I played him for boy; behold, he is a man!"

When he left her, Barnquist shook off the outward seeming of gaiety that had been his during

his comradeship with the barroom siren. The blanket of mental reaction descended upon him. A wide disgust with the dizened and forward woman swept over him, and he measured, in thought, the difference between her and the girls of the ranches roundabout. The first headlong pursuit of woman in the abstract had been satisfied in him. He now wanted something finer, of a different mold.

It was while this mood was on him that he heard the sound of singing, and he saw, under the level rays of the rising moon, a girl riding trail-ward. He caught the lilt of the fresh, clear voice. Barnquist spurred his horse and in a trice had swept alongside Berenice. He knew her at a glance.

The moon, mellowing everything in its effulgence, had made of the sordid texture of the girl's cheap dress a fabric of wonder. The umber shadows cast by her hat's brim were on her face and added to it a touch of mysterious charm. Her seat in her saddle was superb. So different was she from the woman he had left, so far above himself, that Barnquist instinctively reined his horse aside and swept his hat low in salute. The girl, coming to herself with a start, gave him a cold:

"Evening, sir," touched her pony with a reminding spur and was up the trail before Barnquist could awaken from his maze.

The beauty of her, the song of her, the aloofness of her from him and his ilk, the chill of those eyes, together smote him to the core. A wave of deeper disgust for the Mexican woman swept him.

To pursue Berenice, to ride her down, to possess her, seemed the easiest, most attainable things. But Barnquist had too deep a knowledge of what that would mean in Texas, then, to attempt it. Berenice, a daughter of the soil, the pure, the good, granddaughter of a Native Son, poor in purse, was yet a goddess, a being far, far above an upstart Barnquist, and was not to be soiled thus by violence. But he might wait, plan, contrive.

Like lightning his thoughts leaped the chasm of the possibilities; he saw himself married to her, accepted as his hard-fisted father had not been, the old cattle-rustling reputation lost under the mantle of Berenice's good name, Ox Bow the center of real influence that his father had been compelled to buy when he could get it at all.

"I guess," he said to himself, riding quietly homeward soon afterward, "the Chaparral Cock will see less and less o' me. Some women are not wo'th what they cost."

Homing quietly, Berenice put out the pony in the Wickson corral. She went into the house, intent upon procuring a bite of something cold, in order not to put Ma Wickson to any trouble.

No one was in the kitchen, but on the steps outside a rumble of conversation told of Pa Wickson out there talking to — Burlane. The door was ajar. She smiled to think that Burlane was there because, — well, because he might see her on some pretext.

She found some cold pones and bacon and ate with the best relish in days. She finished with a happy feeling of well being and sat quietly. Soon in came Pa Wickson and went by her to bed. She could see the glow of Ed's pipe through the jar of the door; the fragrance of the smoke came to her.

She got up quietly, and pushed the door open, as if with intent to go out. Then she drew back.

"Oh, is some one there?"

"Yes, Miss Ber'nice," came Burlane's deep, musical bass.

"Oh."

She did not come out. But neither did she go in.

Puff, puff, puff!!! from Ed.

The pipe glowed, the red of it lighting up his strong, calm features. He did not look over his shoulder at her.

"Ahem!"

She moved her feet, edged way out, let the door slam to.

Puff, puff, puff!!! from Ed.

"Ahem," she repeated. She stepped to the

edge of the little stoop of squared logs and slumped down, dangling her feet, as his were. Her heels kept time to the rhythm of his on the log ends.

"If, Mr. Burlane —" with serious inflection.

"Mr. Ed," he suggested tentatively.

"Well, then, Mr. *Ed!*"

"Yes?" noncommittally.

"Oh, dear, men are so dense —"

"Eh?" turning toward her.

"Well, Midnight —"

"Wow!" he bounced up. "What about him? Do you know anything —"

"Oh, if it were about me —"

"But do you know —"

"Oh, fudget!"

She got up. He companioned her, eagerly, to the door.

"Please, Miss Ber'nice," he pleaded.

And then she relented. In five minutes he was in possession of her story and had made a plan for ascertaining the truth of the case.

"You 'll never know, Miss Ber'nice," he said, with deep feeling, "how much you 've done for me, if it turns out that I get th' horse through your information. He means a lot to me, Midnight does."

"I think a lot of him, too — Mr. Ed," she returned, dodging past him into the house, "and now, good night."

"Good night, Miss Ber'nice. You been mighty good to me."

And long after she was gone Ed stood, head bared, in worship of the very passing of her presence.

Then he went out to the street, whistling.

CHAPTER XVIII

"OH, MIDNIGHT!!!"

A-FORK one of the tame Wickson nags, Ed soon was well outside of Coppered Jack, on his way toward the Chaparral Cock. He had no clear purpose in view save one, — to locate a possible concealed stable. Ed had seen and heard enough of the tricks of the horse thieves of lower San Felicé to be aware that there was a possibility of an underground stable, hidden under a cut-bank or in some steep-walled dry draw, and he knew that the dry draw behind the wayside joint was of likely formation for such a hiding place for stolen equines.

He circled widely from the regular trail and, perhaps a mile from the Chaparral Cock, dismounted and left the sleepy old cayuse to drowse, with reins over his sedate head. Ed went on toward the spring, keeping well back of the joint and its outlying small buildings. He had moved slowly, so it was late.

He approached the spring in silence, gliding like a fox from swell to swell of the rolling prairie. He remained for a long time atop the high side

of the dry draw, then slid over the edge into the dimmer shadows of the inward slope. The wind in the hackberries just whispered. There was a faint underfoot hum of insects; a nightjar, flitting overhead, made his wing-pinions thrum mournfully in the last effort of his downward swoop for moths.

The tinkle of the waters from the little spring, as they overflowed the rim of the cup they had made in the lap of Mother Earth, was music to Ed's ears. Once there he drew himself erect and listened intently.

From the Chaparral Cock came the lilt of "La Paloma", as some lazy-fingered, oily-voiced Mexican played and sang Yradier's masterpiece. In the gloom of the hollow no light's beam penetrated, save the fading glow of the westering moon that made the high lights of the scene silver and left the low lights in umbers.

Ed felt for his guns and edged forward. He suspected the group of hackberries, — penetrated it. He did not care to strike a match and make himself a target for a possible bullet. That would have been too easy for the horse thieves, for after killing him, they would only need to remove the stallion and then claim that Ed had been shot as a skulker in the night, — and their defense would have been perfect.

An oblong patch of deeper umber still intrigued Ed. It was so at variance with the ir-

regular shadows of the hackberry leaf-clusters, that it plainly was of man-made origin. He wormed toward it — reached for it. It was but a hole in the ground. And an oblong hole, of depth not to be plumbed by Ed's arm. He felt to the sides of it. Timbering!

Ed forced his head into the gap. He listened. Not a sound. He had hoped there would be the deep-chested breathing of the horse. But he called softly:

"Oh, Midnight!"

Nothing rewarded him. No answering stamp of impatient feet, no sound of a healthy, loose pelt being shaken in joyful token of recognition; no tenderly phrased whicker!

"Oh, Midnight!"

Nothing.

Ed fingered a gun's butt. He called again:

"Dear old son-of-a-gun! Oh, Midnight!"

"Mater Dolorosa!"

From the bottom of the deep hole came that groaning cry, poignant with agony.

Ed forced his body inward and dropped. As the big range rider landed on what his alert senses told him was dry earth at the hole's bottom, his hand flicked to his guns' butts. He was on tiptoes, ready to wheel, poised for a death struggle if one came.

He heard the voice again:

"Nomine Domini, y Filis —"

"A Mexican saying his last prayers," Ed judged.

He bent over, his ears guiding him as he inched forward. His boot toe touched something.

He felt about, the man groaned again hollowly.

"If you 're shammin', it 's your last sham," Ed warned. "I 'm goin' to have a look at you."

He flared the light of a match on to the prone form. It showed him a Mexican of the lesser breed, — a man of peon class. One side of his face was battered out of all semblance of humanity. The eyes, dulling to a death-film, told their story.

A long, shuddering sigh; a rattle in the throat. The next match showed Ed that the man had gone Beyond!

The range rider stood for a long time silent, with the thought that the flare of his matches might have been seen by any one in line with the opening by which he had entered. Then, lighting match after match, he read the tragedy in the tracks on the soft, earthen floor of the secret stable, in the blood and attitude of the dead man's useless clay.

The peon had entered the stable with a pail of water. Evidently the horse had taken the water, for only a few drops had struck the floor where the man had stood while holding up the pail to the stallion, — drops such as a horse will let fall from his damp muzzle after drinking well.

Then, as the deeper imprint of the dead man's right foot showed and the pail's lower hoop, that had a jagged edge, corroborated, the man had struck the splendid stallion a wanton blow, cutting his glossy coat and tearing out a bit of hide that was still adherent to the pail's ragged lower hoop.

And then, wheeling, pivot-wise, the great animal had lashed out, and the strong hind hooves had crushed the man's face. He had fallen, like a poled ox, and the stallion, finding the door ajar, had nosed it open and had gone.

The hoof marks were those Ed knew so well — would have picked from among a thousand prints of common hooves — the prints of his own big black.

Yes, gone to the open prairie; a stray, already on his way back toward his home range near Vernon!

Forgetful for the moment of the dead man, Ed stepped through the concealed door into the open. He walked down toward the spring, called, but softly:

"Oh, Midnight!"

There was no answer. The wind soughed in the hackberries. The nightjar swooped low with thrumming wings, a dun bat wheeled out between eyes and dropping moon. The lilt of "La Paloma" went on and on, like a strophe of regret recurrent.

"Darned old son-of-a-gun!" Ed voiced mournfully to the wind; "you got one of 'em, anyway."

Then, under the impulse of a sudden resolution, Burlane turned toward the Chaparral Cock, determined if possible to discover which one of the hangers-on there was guilty of the theft of his beloved horse.

Up till the time Berenice had given him the news, he had not been sure where the horse might be, but now search for the thief had narrowed; clearly it was some one that made use of the hospitality of the wayside *aguardiente* joint! For the spring, although not on the land on which the building was squatted, was used by the people who hung about the place, and the concealed stable was clearly a part of the Chaparral Cock's secret sources of illicit revenue!

The lilt of Yradier's immortal song had ceased; the click of dice only was heard, as Ed came to the door and glanced in. He entered carelessly — hat brim pushed well back, smile on face — with a nod for Maretta, who was chatting with Aguilar as he lounged at the bar. The player sat against the side wall, the instrument in his lap. The gamesters hardly glanced up. Ed's eyes swept them all, — a neutral, drab lot.

"A toss o' fire water," he smiled at Maretta, clanging down his coin. She served him. He

sipped, eyeing Aguilar's easy, graceful pose. Ed suddenly shot out:

"There 's a man dead — down by th' spring by th' hackberries."

Aguilar swerved as if a serpent had stung his heel, — then caught himself and steeled to quietude.

"Yes," Ed persisted, eyeing Aguilar intently as the Mexican, hands hipped, swayed before him like a graceful viper reared in mid-coil; "a man there — plumb dead — "

"The Señor spoke so queeck," Aguilar finessed.

"You ain't heard me out, *hombre,*" Ed went on remorselessly.

"I attend, Señor."

He swayed again, viper-like, hands snugged closer to hips. His pouting lips were drawn back in a half smile. The players at the games had ceased to wager; the man with the stringed instrument held it mute. Maretta, eyes dancing, eyed them in silence.

"An' that man," Ed finished, sipping the last of his drink and sending the glass spinning toward the woman, "he jus' plumb pushed his face so hard ag'inst a hoss's hind hoof that it caved in. His face, I mean, not the hind hoof."

Aguilar's face went black. He started, calmed, smiled, asked:

"And that man, where was he? "

"In some sort of an underground stable — queer place, *hombre!* I happened in there — heard the man groan when I was to the spring for a drink. So I did, *hombre,*" his voice steady, level, his eyes holding those of the swaying man-viper.

"And then, Señor?" the voice was liquid, easy, soft as silk.

"Tha 's all, *hombre,* except this, *hombre,*" menace flaring into the even tones.

"*Si,* Señor!" swaying again.

"My Midnight hoss, he was stole a bit back. It was his hooves that smashed in your peon's face, Aguilar. The big hoss, he 's gone to th' open range. You 're goin' to th' Coppered Jack calaboose."

The swaying ceased. The black eyes went to pins' points. The hipped hands jerked weaponward.

"*I would n't do that, hombre!*"

Ed's voice, low, firm, resonant, intoned his warning. His two guns were level with the other's chest before the Mexican could complete his draw. Having the "age" from hipped hands had not availed against the lightning draw of the Texan.

The gamesters' chairs scraped. Aguilar gave them a glance aside.

"None o' that," Ed warned; "if any one tips my hand, you die, Aguilar."

The Mexicans formed in a group between him and the door. Aguilar eyed them hopefully. One or two of them were already fingering weapons —

Ed threw one gun over, casually, the other still on the chest of his captive. The fiery spit of it flamed — a new-drawn gun leaped from the hands of the dark-skin who had drawn it.

Ed flicked a glance at the woman. Unseen by Aguilar, who was watching the other men, she made a sign, and at it the others stood aside.

"You march now, *hombre,*" Ed ordered, throwing the other gun down in line with Aguilar. "When we get you into th' calaboose, you may feel like sayin' things that 's to my likin' and, anyway, a Mexican hoss thief 's not goin' to be held in such high regard as you might think, *hombre.* You march, now."

In silence Aguilar went from the place. Ed called an order back to have the dead peon buried. As he did so, the single back glance he could spare showed him the woman smiling, her smile unseen by the others, as they were all watching the going of Aguilar.

"I would n't say she was depressed much over your coming engaolment," Ed said to Aguilar's back.

Once clear of the Chaparral Cock, Ed shifted a gun to his belt, jammed the other under the captive's ribs and put a hand on to the man's velvet

collar. He piloted him toward where the sleepy cayuse drowsed, found the horse, forced Aguilar up, tied his legs underneath the belly of the horse and began his long walk across country to Coppered Jack.

Dawn found them in the town, and dawn, too, found Aguilar in the calaboose. Ed made the charge of horse stealing against the Mexican, and a man rode out to inform Lars Maltrane who, in his capacity as first deputy of that part of San Felicé, should notify Sheriff Harvison of the arrest and the reason therefor.

After a short nap and breakfast, Ed went to see Berenice and to tell her the outcome of his night ride. She greeted him happily, and their pleasant chat banished the last lingering memory of their recent estrangement. After that Ed went to the calaboose with things for Peters, and then he cross-questioned Aguilar. But the Mexican remained stubborn, refusing to admit that he knew anything of Midnight. As the man was in custody, Ed could not press him hard and was forced to go away, baffled for the time, followed by the low, derisive chuckle of the smooth-voiced Mexican.

Then Ed rode out to the Chaparral Cock again and tried to take up Midnight's trail, but the dryness of the soil, after the moist vicinity of the spring was passed, the trampling of the trail by cattle coming and going made it impossible for

him to follow it. He gave ample notice to every one that his horse was at large and increased the reward, and then had to be content to wait for news that perhaps — probably — would never come.

As for Midnight, in his first blind rush for freedom, crazed by the scent of the bloodied human carrion who had tortured him and worried him so often when the kindly equine giant, harried for drink, had approached him trustingly, he had gone far and fast. The feel of the cool night air on his skin, so long tortured by flies in that underground, close stable, was glorious. The thrumming of his great hooves was music to his own ears. He made no sound at first, save that from his rhythmic galloping. He had only one great urge, — to be away from men, the dark-skinned, the cruel men.

His muscles, softened by lack of exercise, hurt him at first as he kept up that reaching, mile-devouring stride, belly close to earth, legs opening, closing with graceful force. The tang of the trampled earth under him, the swish of the air against his ears that were pointed forward in the direction of his course were like spurs to his weariness, and he quite forgot that he had rested but little during his period in the buried prison, for he had been so heart-hungry for his own master, so worried over his own banishment from sunlight and blue of sky, that he had almost lost heart.

But now the open spaces called, the inner springs of his energy were tapped by the urge of great opportunity to be free.

After a first great burst of matchless speed, Midnight slowed to a steady, relentless lope, and his big heart, eased of the strain of super-effort, quieted and ceased to hurt; the deep lungs lost their deadening ache as his second wind came to ease him of his fatigue.

He passed groups of cattle, burst through them like a whirlwind. A lean lobo wolf, angry over being frightened from a feast on a calf he had cut from a bunch of cattle, bared his fangs as Midnight burst upon him and sprang for the glossy, outstretched neck of the racing stallion. Hardly slacking his pace, Midnight caught the big wolf in mid-stride squarely in the middle of his gray back and left him to die, howling.

And now the night cooled still more, and ever the big horse fled, without anything to guide him except fear of man and desire to be out, away, in the dimmer, deeper solitudes of the open range.

The stars paled; sudden dawn smote them into nothingness. The hooves thrummed as Midnight topped rise after rise, sank into troughs between rolls of the prairie sod. With the inborn wisdom of the range horse he avoided dog holes.

The red sun came up, white clouds drifted; the big horse slackened his pace, began to fox-trot, then, after a time, to walk.

He had gotten the scent of that carrion's blood out of his nostrils; the pain of the torn wound made by the water pail was eased. He was tired, but the palsy of prisonment was gone from his immense muscles. His flanks heaved; his nostrils were dilated, his eyes wild. But inside he was happy — almost. There was something lacking.

Afar he spied a group of hackberries. He knew them for a good tree, for often such trees meant water. He minced toward them, ears forward, nose quivering as he sniffed for human beings. No taint of man was on the air. Midnight strode into the trees' midst.

There was a small, old house there, and a lush touch of green beside it told of water.

Midnight took a nip of fresh grass, a drink, — a little one at first, as Ed had taught him to do. Then, weariness of muscle overcoming him, he stretched out in the shade and soon was asleep.

Gophers, their cheek pouches filled with seeds, scuttled by, pausing to view the sleeping beauty, then whisked away. A dun hawk wheeled overhead, sending his piercing cry down to the earthfolk at times. A giant buzzard quested for prey off in the dimmer distances. Midnight slept on and on.

Of a sudden he awoke, got up, shook his hide, snorted, fell to feeding. Between nips he drank daintily.

It was the first time since colthood that he had

been away from man. Petted by Burlane, brought up like a child, never misused, the treatment of the Mexicans had all but maddened him. And now he was alone.

He lay down and rolled, grunting in sheer ecstasy. Ways and habits of discipline rolled from him. The feel of the earth, the swish of the little baby-wind were good to him.

But there was something else. His thirst was satisfied; his hunger. The tide of life ran strong and sweet in him again. But there was something else.

He vibrated his deep chest in a delightful whicker — and listened for a loved voice that had uttered phrases that he never had understood — but whose tones meant something that reached away down into the depths of his noble being, words like:

"Darned ol' son-of-a-gun, you Midnight!"

His muzzle, velvety, cool now after drinking, seemed to be ill at ease, to want a touch of something — the rub of a firm, loving palm. Midnight whickered again, gazed about him.

The house was deserted; no faintest taint of man-scent was on it.

The sun went down; the stars sprang forth. Night birds called in the little grove; gophers scuttled.

The big horse whinnied pleadingly, lovingly. There was no answer to his love-call.

He shook himself, laid down, stretched his long legs and let his neck relax, his head snuggle to the cool earth. And then he slept again, yet in his dreams he could still hear the familiar jingle of spurs, the sound of that voice that was to him the sweetest sound of all:

"Darned ol' son-of-a-gun, you, *Midnight!*"

CHAPTER XIX

"LYNCH THE GREASER!"

CAME Lars Maltrane clattering into Coppered Jack in due time, when the shadow of the squat, strong, 'dobe calaboose had crept westward and made a rectangular blotch of shadow on the town's thin fringe where the jail stood apart from other structures in that section. He came thin-lipped, eyes close-lidded, but agate-chill still behind their ambushment of wire-fine brows. He came, thoughtful, grim — and alone. Ed's word that Aguilar was jailed, on a charge of horse stealing, had called Lars in.

Maltrane took charge at the calaboose at once. He made an inspection, gave Peters a few curt words of greeting, girded at Aguilar, then took his station at the door, sitting there, chair tilted back, hat drawn over his hard eyes.

Coppered Jack buzzed, but not to the boiling point. Perhaps the sight of that stern man-slayer there had its effect. He had been known as Barnquist's familiar spirit, but he had been known, too, as a man who never shot for pure love of blood. None of his killings ever had gone into

court; self-defense, clearly shown, always had been his justification, or another had been found for him by the power of his dead employer. So now the buzz against Aguilar was subdued, if persistent, with Maltrane on guard.

Came, later, Barnquist, with Pardee, Weaver, and half a score of mean-faced Ox Bovians at their heels. Barney rode with a swagger, talked loudly, made the rounds of what places of solace for his kind were to be found in the town. Ever behind him he left slaked thirsts, and the buzz against Aguilar grew louder and louder.

They converged upon the gaol in due time. Burlane, homing from his wonted trip out to Twin Springs, had unharnessed the ponies and strolled down toward the calaboose, minded to see Aguilar again, if only through the bars of the 'dobe's single window. From the edge of the narrowing circle of talkers Ed watched events.

"I 'd git back a bit, if so-be I was you, boys," Lars Maltrane said casually. There was a chill assurance in his implied command.

The fame of him, the menace of him, were such that they all drew back, — except Barnquist, who thus was left face to face with his hireling.

"You 're whirling a pretty big loop to-day?" Barnquist bantered, but with an undertone of defiance not entirely assumed.

"Yes?" a deft hand idling with a sinister gun-butt, and so quickly had Maltrane's quicksilver-

like muscles shifted that to Barnquist it came with a shock that the killer, at need and fair-warned, was easily his master.

"I was just a-joshin' you, Lars," with a smile intended to conciliate.

"Yes?" In the same low-pitched, casual way.

The deft hand dropped from sinister gun. The thin brows wrinkled, the eyes were uncovered, uneasily lidded. The tense form in the tip-tilted chair did not move. Only the deep chest took a bit more of a breath than usual.

"But th' greaser ought to be hanged — stealing a hoss so —"

"You tell that to Harvison, Barney. I 'm first deputy of San Felicé an' have a prisoner in my charge."

"You 've done things —"

"I guess that 'll do you, sonny," with mock courtesy and deference. "When I 'm at your back, on Ox Bow, I take your orders. But when I 'm in Harvison's place here, I take nobody's but his'n. Your pap, he *all*-ways knew that, an' he let me be deputy when occasion required. You profit by his example."

Barnquist scowled, turned on his heel, went away. Ed had not sought to make himself apparent to the heir of Ox Bow, but now sauntered forward and stood before the door of the gaol.

"Howdy, Maltrane," he gave.

"Howdy," never stirring.

"I 'd like to inch in an' see Mr. Peters."

The cold eyes focussed on Ed's smiling face, the grim mouth gave forth the ghost of an answering smile.

"Inch in, then, pilgrim."

"Thanks."

Inside Ed found Peters by the window of the one room. Aguilar, on the long, wide bench that did as seat and by night as bunk, was smoking. He gave Ed a word of derision, but Burlane disregarded him. He rendered an account of affairs at Twin Springs to Peters, chatted as was his daily wont. Presently he went out.

Maltrane, against the door, was still meditative. Ed paused, affected to regard other things. Aside he studied the face of the somber guard. The other men, drafted by the emergency to act as gaolers, were off below in the town eating, relieved therefor by Maltrane.

"Did you ever, Young Timer," the grim guard asked suddenly, just as Ed was about to go, "shoot six times, hand-runnin', at a perfectly chunky man, an' miss him ever' time?"

"Why, no," Ed replied pleasantly. "I 'd be surprised to be alive if so-be I 'd ever done anything as foolish as that-all."

"Well, I did — once," Maltrane said, wagging his head positively. "An' I ain't over wondering how it come about yit."

Ed wisely countered:

"Well, a man that can't shoot better than that ought to quit, Maltrane."

"I been thinking of that, too, Young Timer. I would, on'y — "

He shifted his weight, fell upon silence. Ed turned to go.

"Only I want to find out why it was. Savvy?"

"Yo tambien, señor!"

The afternoon waned. The Ox Bow crowd circulated, yipped and yi-ed, let off a few careless shots. Maltrane, tiptilted against the calaboose wall, was silent. And ever the phrase was heard, more and more:

"Lynch the greaser."

Aguilar, peering through the barred upper half of the gaol's strong door, heard the cry — and cringed. Peters heard it and spat.

"What beats my time," Maltrane called in to Peters toward night, "is that Barnquist is so busy working up a lynchin' bee on this no-'count Mex, when, by rights, he ought to be tryin' to hemp-tie you that killed his daddy."

"I been considerin' that, too," Peters said. "On'y I did n't kill his father *a*-tall, Mal."

"I guess I 'll have to class it wit' that other myst'ry 'bout your bein' alive, this day, 'stead of bein' full o' holes like Missus Wickson's colander."

"Yo' c'n class it where an' how you please; I did n't kill his daddy — an' you know it, Mal."

"Le 's not be a'gumentatious, Peters. That 's for Doc Alberstone t' settle, not us."

"Huh-uh!"

Then silence.

Off down toward the Thimble Belt the cry arose anew, louder, more menacing:

"Kill th' greaser!"

Aguilar came to the barred window on the side around the corner from where Maltrane guarded the portal. He hung on to the bars and yammered:

"Do not permeet dhat dhey heeng me, Señor Maltrane!"

"I 'll do what a man c'n do — go clear through," the serpent-eyed gaoler answered in his slithering, oilily smooth tones, "an' you stow yo'r gab an' go on to th' bunk an' chaw a bone."

"*Si*, Señor," meekly, all his suave braggadocio gone.

From the more hectic fringes of the milling mob below came the cry again:

"Hang th' greaser!"

Maltrane spat.

"Peters, a mob yellin' is ha'mless as a Mexican hai'less dawg. It 's w'en a mob growls or is still — then, beware!"

And yet, toward sundown, the noise subsided, Barnquist drew his followers about him, and they

clattered out toward the big ranch. When they went, the cries for lynching decreased, then the public desire for blood guttered out in a few whoops of joyful throats down at the Thimble Belt.

Maltrane, waiting for Harvison, heaved a sigh of relief and swung his chair down on all fours. He permitted the other guards to take charge and went to the Eagle Short Order for his bite, having been informed that Greasewood Kate was cooking there and that Ess-Way was waiting on the table.

At the head of his brusque clan, Barnquist made his big roan to *pasear* and dance. Now that he had learned the ways of the horse, once his father's, he liked it as much as his black nature would permit him to like anything. He did not like the beast for his bone, beauty of form, willingness to do well for a hard master, but solely for his ability to put miles behind him — to endure. In other words, to Barney the horse was simply a piece of mechanism, to be driven hard — to the death if need be — if he, Barney, thereby was served.

And as he rode there crinkled in his pocket a letter that had arrived that morning and which was the reason for his going back to Ox Bow that early and for making his attempt to create a lynching sentiment in Coppered Jack merely tentative that day.

Arrived at Ox Bow, Barney gave this order to Weaver:

"Weav, see if there 's some one waiting for me in th' office."

Weaver jingled away, spurs a-chime, to come back soon with the word:

"Mr. Blackwell from Vernon is the'e, Barney."

Barnquist swung down and turned the big roan over to Weaver. Pardee marshaled his men off to the bunkhouse. Barnquist went in to the ranch office.

The ruddy-faced lawyer met the heir of Ox Bow with profuse greetings that Barney brushed aside.

"Yes, I got your letter. I 'm here. What is it?"

He pointed to the chair that Blackwell had vacated when he arose to greet him. Barney sat in its mate, across the rough table or desk.

"I thought the letter would make it plain," began Blackwell, with a deprecatory wave of a heavy hand.

"The letter jus' says you want half th' Ox Bow water — or all of it, less what the ranch itself will need."

"Yes."

"Well, Blackwell, you are attorney for the Soda Lake Company as well as for Ox Bow. I know that. It was on your advices that pap be-

gan those irrigation ditches and such. Now, I 'm only a cub, it seems, but you can't sell me out — easy."

He eyed the older man narrowly. Blackwell blinked, "hawed."

"You would n't be offerin' to buy if there was n't a reason — good to you."

"Why, we can get all th' water we want — free — at Twin Springs. Peters does n't care."

"Then why not keep on gettin' it and let my ditches alone?"

This reply, snapped out with vigor, shot across the table like a bullet. Blackwell gulped with a force that told how the shot had centered the target.

He leaned back and twiddled his thumbs over his ample front. He scowled, considered, "hawed and hemmed."

"You been into your dad's papers?" he finally asked rather anxiously.

"Yes, Blackwell. At first I made fun o' pap 'bout those ditches. I was on'y a raw kid an' did n't understand business. But I 'm of a new mind now. To-day, after your letter came, I came across some of th' letters you wrote him, urging him to go into th' irrigation project. Now show all your cards. You can't fool me wit' soft sawder, Blackwell. The fact is, is n't it, that the Soda Lake Company is going to triple its business, has signed new contracts, will need all the

water at Twin Springs and most o' Ox Bow's water, too? Mebbe I been hearin' things, too."

The other's face showed how the shots had centered into the midst of his plans for getting Ox Bow water at a cheap rate for his bigger client, the Soda Corporation.

"Well, yes, Barney," he admitted at last; then, with a gush of apparent good feeling, "I was only trying you out to see if you were smart and able to 'tend your own affairs, like — "

"Aw, keep in th' saddle an' ride, Blackwell. You feed that soft sawder to th' widows an' orphans down in Vernon. I don't want it. The man that runs Ox Bow needs guts, not jawyer-talk, to put him through. Now, what 's at the bottom o' your sack? "

Silence for a space. Horses neighed afar; a man, spur-heeled, went by the window, jingling.

Blackwell leaned impressively across the table to say:

"I thought I could swing this myself, Barney, that 's true. But I see I 'll have to let you in. We 've tried again and again to reach old Peters, but he won't sell his water, less what he needs for his own small uses. He takes pride in being the son of a Native Son and in having a grant from Sam Houston that runs as long as grass grows and water runs. He can't sell the land, but he can lease it and th' water, but he has refused us a score of times."

"You know where he is?"

"Yes, and why."

Silence now. Evil eye met suave eye, as man measured man.

"How much will that soda gang pay for all the water, less what Ox Bow needs? They want to get it so 't they can shut out possible competition?"

"Yes, talk of competition, too. Le 's see," considering.

"No hidin' out, now, Blackwell; your fees all out."

The lawyer's fat tongue licked his livid lips. He gasped:

"For all, less what you use only, fifty thousand dollars a year — "

Barney's face almost betrayed him. The sum was so large to him, who theretofore had handled but little actual cash, that it seemed colossal.

It meant power, pleasure, everything. No more waiting for the round-up for ready, cash money. No bickering with supply houses in Fort Worth when the range dried and steers died by thousands. He saw the magic phrase: "fifty thousand dollars a year", and to his imagination it meant gay times at the Planters', in St. Louis, trips to New York, jolly-dog *pasears* down to San Antone —

"Blackwell, I 'll get it all for you. But tell me one thing. If Peters dies without other heirs —

is hung, we 'll say, for th' murder o' pap — it all goes to th' girl? "

" Yes," with a smirk and a knowing leer.

" S'pose she dies," Barnquist's voice was ghost-like in its covert menace. His eyes were hardened to pins' points; his mouth white-lipped with intensity.

" The land would escheat to the State and be open to lease — by some ranch that really, ahem, really needed the water — say Ox Bow — one with pull."

The heavy voice came back to full again. The heavy fist of the new-made cattle princeling banged on to the table as he said:

" You go back to Vernon, Blackwell; go back an' leave me alone."

" Then you 're going into it? "

" Yes, clear through with it. I 'm going to have all th' water here and hereabouts; all that flows under the sky, except what Coppered Jack uses. Never do to meddle with their supply? "

" No; the Soda Company may need some useful public sentiment after a time — when taxes are laid, maybe damage suits brought, and th' like."

" You 're talkin' plain now, Blackwell, manwise. You listen here, Blackwell. I 'm goin' to have all that water, all or none. It 'll take some little time, but I 'll make it. When you go back to Vernon, make out what papers are needed

an' have them ready. Then wait — till you hear from me."

Blackwell shook hands with him, and over cigars they talked over the details of what might be for Ox Bow, if the deal with the Soda Company could be brought within the province of the real.

CHAPTER XX

CHAPARRAL COCK'S LAST CROW

BARNEY BARNQUIST was up betimes next morning, stirring with vigor about the ranch house and among the men. Ever he talked of the vileness of Mexicans and the vileness of Mexican horse thieves in particular. He saw Blackwell, who had remained for the night, down-trail a way, came back and stormed again against Mexican marauders.

The surly wolf-crew of Ox Bow, catching the drift of their master's seeming intent, growled among themselves against Mexicans, all and sundry. Weaver, sputtering away at the stump of his pipe's stem, echoed the words of his chief. Barnum, glib of tongue, followed suit, issuing from the "office" every little while to take his part.

"I want that you boys keep in close to th' home base t'day," Barney ordered, about mid-forenoon; "I 'm goin' to take Weaver an' ride over to that Chaparral Cock joint an' see what I c'n find out. It 's my notion it 's stood long 'nuff. 'T was all right as a place to drop in an'

get a drink, but if it 's a hoss-thievin' joint, we might 's well find it out."

There was a growl of approval at this. The young boss had said it — and anyway, amusements were few out in the range country. If it came to a foray against Mexicans, or a lynching, why —

" C'm on, Weav," and Barney swung up on to the big roan. Weaver followed him. They set off down-trail at a swift lope.

" Weaver," Barney said, when they had ridden a mile, " you know I 've been fussin' 'round that Maretta down to th' Chaparral Cock? "

" I ain't pryin' into none o' your private affairs," Weaver chuckled, champing at his pipe's stem with libidinous vigor.

" Well, I think I c'n whirl a neat loop on to her, an' she 'll tell me what there is to Aguilar. You play up to me when we get in th' place, an' we 'll see what I c'n coax out o' her."

He smiled leeringly at his man, whose smile answered his own. Then he shifted.

" Weaver, what did you make of Lars Maltrane's bluff o' meanin' to protect th' prisoner yest'day? "

" Oh, Lars takes himse'f seriously as a dep'ty, boss. I think he 'd shoot it out if we pressed him hard."

" Well, I dunno 'bout that thing, Weav. I got my doubts."

"You 're sure entitled to 'em, boss. I 've none. I *know* Lars."

Afar they viewed the Chaparral Cock. At that hour there would be few of its patrons in evidence. They clattered to the tie-rack, swung down and entered. The room was deserted. Over the bar Maretta leaned indolently, smoking.

"Two snorts o' your best," Barney ordered, his face beaming with the admiration she craved from him, for what it was to mean to her if —

She set out the bottle she kept apart for Barney. Weaver drank solemnly. He made a few commonplace remarks and, at a hint from Barney, which brought a smile to the face of the woman, went out to watch the horses. He grinned to himself as his spurs jingled in his going.

Left alone with the woman, Barney slid one of his heavy hands across the bar to engage her soft one. He drew her forward — took a kiss. She whispered a few love-words and he answered. They drank together; he took her newly lighted *cigarro* from her red lips and bade her, with laughter, to light another. She laughed, low and sweet.

It was while he had her so pleased, so softened in her mood, in her expectancy of coming assurance in his deeper, more inclusive, licit love, that he suddenly asked:

"Maretta, did it ever occur to you that mebbe Aguilar an' I might have to settle which of us is to have you?"

She seemed amused at this, for she smiled, her white teeth, like pearls a-row, gleaming enticingly between her full lips.

"Oha, dhat 's joke, Bar*nee,*" she made fun. "Eef dhat Pedro he fools erroun' you, you shoot heem, eh?"

She puffed smoke at him playfully.

"Sure, if he gets out o' that hoss-thievin' scrape. He mos' likely will, as there 's no real proof against him."

"No proof, eh, Bar*nee?*"

"None; no real proof. C'm on, girl; you know a lot 'bout him. I never went into what you 've been to each other, years back. But I want a show-down now, before—*I* take you—"

Gently enough his big hand closed on hers, and he drew her over the bar for another warm kiss. His eyes dwelt glowingly on the curve of her neck and chin.

The woman sighed gently, disengaged herself.

"One mo-*ment,* Bar*nee,*" as she slid from his hold. Into the little back room she glided, to emerge soon with some bits of paper.

"See, here ees proof," she said. "I get dhat Burlane, who lose dhat beeg black *caviard,* to wreet me a leeter for friend down in Vernon."

"Yes," eagerly, caressing a strand of her

black hair that had escaped from bounds and was trailing over her shoulder between them on the bar as she leant over to explain to him.

"See, Bar*nee,*" smoothing the note on the deals for him to see; "I 'm not a wreeter, so I ask dhat Burlane to wreet. Well, Bar*nee,* dhat Aguilar he steals my letter, I find dhat out just theesa morn', w'en I go eento his theengs, makin' rea*dee* to send up to Coppered Jack as he ask by a friend."

"Yes, girl, go on."

"An', Bar*nee,* I find dhat Aguilar, hee 's been usin' my note Burlane made for me to copy out-a bill sale for dhat *caviard* huge. Eh?"

She spread the incriminating draft of the forged bill of sale before her. Barney grasped it, his eyes showing his appreciation of the value of it.

"I 'll use this," he said, kissing her again and again, "to make it sure no Aguilar gets in between us. Savvy?"

"Oh, Bar*nee,*" she murmured, returning his kisses with renewed warmth, "you are so — so — brai*nee.*"

He stepped back, blew her a kiss from his finger tips and was gone. She ran to the doorway and watched the men ride away together. Her eyes were dancing with gratified pride and aroused passions. The raw, pleading boy with whom she had toyed before he had grasped the

reins of power at Ox Bow had developed a masterfulness, an intensity that fascinated the woman, whose wide experience with men had made her such a consummate actress. Aguilar she looked upon as merely one of the many pegs upon which she had stepped her pretty feet in her climb from the obscurity of frontier vice to a position of ease. She had been relentless in her scheming and had no qualms about ending the career of Pedro thus summarily, and she knew enough of public opinion to feel that positive proof of horse thievery would mean the end of Aguilar, without a court trial. She had been considering how to get this proof before the Americanos of the district, and Barney's coming had furnished her with the very excuse she had been looking for. Each had played the other with what each deemed to be success. But the woman had been touched deeply by the rough but seemingly natural display of affection Barney had shown. His direct hints at his intention to claim her, to lift her up beside him when he could do so and especially his determination to get rid of Aguilar, his seeming rival for her affections, had completely deceived her.

So she watched him ride away, and as he rode she saw, in a daydream, herself as mistress of Ox Bow, with fine horses a-plenty, queening it in San Antone's best hotels, perhaps — perhaps coaxing Barney to take her to Europe, to old

Madrid, to Mexico City — where she could hunt bigger game still than wayside horse thieves or even callow cattle princelings.

On the way in to Ox Bow, Barney made Weaver acquainted with the content of the papers he had secured from Maretta. He noted the effect of the direct proof upon his retainer.

"Proof 'nuff to hang a saint," Weaver sputtered into his pipestem. "What more do we want?"

"Nothin', I guess," Barney answered significantly.

They swirled up to the bunkhouse, where Pardee had his clan marshaled. Barney was waving the papers in his left hand, and he called as he threw the big roan back on to his haunches and stilled him with his heavy right hand:

"Here 's full proof, boys, absolute, 'nuff to hang a saint, as Weav says, that Aguilar stole Burlane's hoss."

He passed the papers to Pardee, explaining that he had gotten them from Maretta under threat of a raid on the Chaparral Cock if she shielded Aguilar. He watched Weaver as he said that and noted the saturnine grin with which Weaver heard it and so knew that Weaver had heard some of his blandishing phrases to the Mexican woman.

Pardee glanced at Barney inquiringly after he had inspected the papers and passed them to some

of the ranch hands who had gathered about the two horsemen at Barney's first greeting.

"I vote to clean out that cussed joint," Barney said. "We got proof it 's been used by hoss thieves. It ought to be wiped out."

"I 'm sure agreeable t' that," Pardee bellowed, catching the drift of the master's temper. "Whoopee, boys; le 's get action on this."

"Yoweeee!"

In a moment the Ox Bovians had snatched from the pegs their horse gear and descended upon the home corral, and man after man soon swung up into saddle. The horses, catching the excitement, danced, bucked; the men yelled.

Barney sat firmly in his saddle on the big roan, quiet, alert. He put on a sheepish face as Pardee glanced at him inquiringly again.

"No; I 'm not goin' to ride out on such an arrant," he explained; "you-all know I been makin' some eyes at that Maretta — "

Pardee laughed; the other men grinned.

"You men go down to th' Chaparral Cock an' jus' clean its clock. Make it no use to anybody. No killin' if so-be it c'n be he'ped — "

"But th' woman?" Weaver asked.

Barney hung his head a moment as if in shamefaced cogitation, then said:

"You put her on her white pony an' you tell her to go an' keep on a-goin', an' if she sputters 'bout me, you tell her — "

He paused as if ashamed. Then he turned his face, bluff and fair, toward them and finished:

"You tell her t' go t' hell an' keep a-hoopin' thataway. I been makin' sheep's eyes at her, O. K., but we can't have no hoss thieves on th' skirts o' Ox Bow. Here, Pardee, gimme that bunch o' proofs before you go. I 'll turn it over to Harvison. It 'll furnish a good explanation."

"Don't blame you for not wantin' to horn in on this party," Pardee said heartily, turning the proofs over. Barney pocketed them.

"Ner none o' us do," Weaver echoed into his pipestem.

Barnquist ordered Barnum to remain, much to the ex-barkeeper's chagrin. Then he watched them go, the flicker of an amused smile on his ruddy face, an expression of covert craft about his mouth. When their dust had settled and they were out of sight down-trail, he swung down, turned the roan into the corral and went toward the ranch house, calling upon Barnum to follow.

In the "office" Barney sat silent for a time, Barnum eagerly watching him.

"Barnum, you never told any one 'bout findin' that curious dirt on th' mirror behind the Thimble Belt's bar after th' shootin'?"

"No, Barney," with a sly smile.

"That play o' yourn seemed to show brains, Barnum. Now I got a new one." His face was open, bluff, frank.

"Yes?"

"We gotta finish that Aguilar. It 's a dead-open-an'-shut case on him. But you know Harvison! He 's a procrastinator. Look how he 's fooled over Peters! I 'm 'bout sick o' these law's delays."

Barnum's sly smile deepened.

"Th' play is like this, Barnum. After th' boys are back f'om th' Chaparral Cock, we 're goin' to *pasear* into Coppered Jack."

"Yes," with smile sly and weasel-like. An expression of growing pleasure showed on the long-jawed face.

"Lars Maltrane, he 's got to make a show o' fightin' to save his reputation, like. I 've had word to him a'ready, Barnum."

"You been busy this mornin', sure 'nuff."

"Pretty. Now, Barnum," leaning forward impressively, "as we swarm 'bout th' calaboose in Coppered Jack, Lars, he 'll make a show, as I say. You be in front o' th' crowd and jump him —"

"Not me, boss," with an expression of fear.

"Now, Barnum, I said I 'd had word to Lars."

"Yes?" but still with fear on his face.

"You jump him. That 's th' play. He makes a show o' shootin' you, but he shoots high — a purpose — savvy that?"

"Oh, yes," good humor again appearing on his smooth face.

"You grab him and rastle him; we swarm on to him. We down him — gently, o' course. But he makes a whoopin' noise. Once he 's down, th' other guard 'll lope. We takes th' Mexican out an' hangs him up as a reminder to Harvison to get a move on toward th' Peters case."

"Why not include Peters?"

"No; I 'm jus' after th' Mexican — to-day."

"All right. I 'm your man. I 'll jump Lars. It 's all understood?"

"Yes; he 's got his tip on th' play. We might shoot it out wit' Lars. He 'd kill a few, an' get killed, O. K. But we save his face for him, an' it 's all right. This little talk is between us. None o' th' other boys is on to th' play. But w'en they see Lars has missed you an' is down, they 'll swarm on to him — an' then —" He made the gesture of a rope being placed about a man's neck. "That f'r th' greaser hoss thief!"

Barnum laughed heartily.

"You act it to the queen's taste, Barney," he said, as he went out.

"What do I care how th' plays tip?" Barney was thinking; "I can't lose. I 'll send that fool into Coppered Jack after th' boys are back an' let him spread news o' findin' th' proof on Aguilar, but tell him to keep away from th' calaboose so 't no one will suspect he 's had a deal on for Lars to go easy on the break when th' fun begins."

In due time, with a swirl of dust, oaths, whoops, the Ox Bow men came riding back. Barney went out to hear Pardee's report, and one glance at the foreman's face proved that they were satisfied. Pardee called:

"We swirled on to th' Cock like a whirlwind. We threw a brace o' greasers out on to th' trail an' tol' 'em to moosey. We got th' woman on to her pony, give her what cash was in th' till, an' drove her off toward Vernon a ways. Then we came back an' wrecked th' joint. It 's burned — nothin' left."

"An' a good job; I 'll file on that little piece for Ox Bow an' add that mite o' a spring in the draw to our holdings. Did th' woman ask after me?" with a rather sheepish grin.

"Yas, she did."

"Well."

"I tol' her jus' what you said — go to hell and keep a-goin' thataway."

There was a general laugh at that sally. Barney joined it, adding:

"I had to cut that string — somehow, boys."

The men grinned and several ventured coarse jokes that he did not resent. After Pardee had given all the details of the eviction, Barney took the lead again.

"Wreckin' th' joint was all right, 's far 's it goes, boys, but there 's Aguilar. We got dead-open-and-shut on him. You-all know Harvison.

Look at Peters, that ought to been in San Felicé for trial long 'go."

There was a rumble of anger at this and several cries of vengeful import.

"We need to show Harvison somethin' of the temper o' Ox Bow," Barney went on. "He 's forgot, I guess, that this end o' San Felicé County 'mounts to so'thin' more 'n a hollow log, boys. I move we-all ride into Coppered Jack an' do what we did n't do yes'day."

"Whoopeee!" from several. The excitement spread; six-guns cracked.

"After we 've had chuck, we 'll ride in," Barney decided.

The men, animated and excited, dispersed under strict orders from Pardee to be ready right after the midday meal.

Barney called Barnum aside and gave him some private orders. Barnum, mounting, was soon on the way to Coppered Jack. He was firmly impressed, too, with the idea that he must not approach Maltrane during the time between his arrival and that of the Ox Bow clan, as to do that, Barney insisted, would mean that folks would suspect he and Maltrane were in the plot, after he had downed the first deputy by jumping on him.

Her lips pouting scornfully still, her full form erect, her hand steady on the bridle rein, Maretta

Esquiemala held in her pony on the last roll of land from which she could look back upon the smoking ruins of the Chaparral Cock.

" And to think," she self accused, " that I, who have cozened so many men, should have been made the fool by a young Texano, with the down hardly on his lip. *Basta,* Maretta, when you cross the Rio Grande the first man you meet will steal your eyes out of your empty head."

Then she turned away with a shrug of her pretty shoulders and faced toward the south. For a time she rode as one dejected; then, bit by bit, she drew erect; then she solaced herself with a smoke, touched the pony with spur, swayed to the motion of his easy lope and went singing, " My love is like the wood-bird wild ", ending with inimitable verve, with the memorable phrase:

> But if I love you; if I love you —
> Beware of me!

And so she vanished — and the San Felicé ranges knew her no more.

CHAPTER XXI

"SPECIAL, FOR ME?"

COPPERED JACK drowsed in noonday inactivity. At the Thimble Belt trade was slack; the Eagle Short Order was in the doldrums, after feeding the strays of the population. Lars Maltrane, chair tiptilted before the calaboose, seemed to nod, or at least his agate-cold eyes were veiled by his thin lids, and the thin line of eyebrow was almost lost, so smooth was it over the veiled eyes of him.

There was a whisk of calico skirts, the noise of well-worn shoes and, basket on arm, Berenice Peters stood before him, smiling.

"I 'd like to take this in to dad," she explained, tapping the basket.

"Why, cer'nly," and he tipped his chair down and got out the big key. He swung the door inward. The vapor from Aguilar's perpetual *cigarro* reeked out. Peters called a cheery greeting to the girl. Lars stepped aside with a slight nod.

"See here, Mr. Maltrane," Berenice said, put-

ting her hand into a corner of the basket and holding up a generous piece of golden-brown cake, "I thought you might want some — for a treat. You men riding range and living in bunkhouses seldom get any real homemade cake. I baked a big one for dad to-day; Ma Wickson let me — "

His hand slid forward to take the cake. His gesture was awkward, embarrassed. He poised the cake on his palm and eyed it longingly.

"'S I understand this play," he asked, a curious vibration in his voice, "you give this here, special? For me?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Maltrane," with her open, frank smile. "You been fair to dad since you came on here, on 'count o' Aguilar. Yes, it 's for you."

"You 'll find it mighty good cake, too, Lars," Peters called from the inside.

"Special, for me?" and he bowed now. She went in.

Maltrane sat down, the cake poised still on his palm. He began slowly to eat it, to luxuriate in its flavor and texture. He ate slowly, as one who wishes to prolong a pleasure. While the daughter and father talked, the door slightly ajar, he nibbled at the unexpected gift. He finished it, licked his finger tips, smiled with a writhe of thin lips, tiptilted his chair again and waited.

Presently Berenice came out, humming, her basket swinging.

"Thanks, Miss," Maltrane said in a low tone. He did not take the trouble to tip his chair down, reached behind her and slammed the door to, catching the lock fast with negligent skill.

"I 'm sure you 're welcome," she answered, nodding and flashing her winning smile at him. Then, basket wagging on her gracefully crooked arm, she went, her very presence breathing forth youth, happiness, trust.

Maltrane glanced after her as long as she was visible. When she had whisked into the Wickson place, Coppered Jack's aspect seemed to him suddenly lonesome. He licked his finger tips again.

"For me, special, she said, cussed little charmer. I 've been paid money to kill; I 've been paid to work; I 've beat men at cards; I 've made my livin' by my wits an' guns — but she 's th' first person, since my mother, that ever did anything, for nothing, for me, special."

The hard lips writhed into a half smile. The thin brows wrinkled. The hard eyes, for a veriest fraction of a heartbeat, seemed misty, — less like agate. And then, with a shrug, he tiptilted the chair against the wall, beside the door, and let his hat fall over his thin-lidded eyes that again were hard, glittering.

The sun swung about; Coppered Jack began to wake up. There came a clatter of hooves; a "yip-tippity-yip!"

At the heels of Barnquist the Ox Bow crowd swept into town. Lars viewed them with eyes judgmatical, then he spat. They paused before the gaol a moment, then went on. Lars spat again.

"No guts in ye," he snarled quietly at their backs. He did not move his chair, as he watched them go.

"For me, special," he said softly. "For me, special, a killer, a skunk, with nothin' to my credit but that I hire out my gun to one man at a time an' play fair with him, an' by th' rules of my game, I 'm hired to watch this jail now, an' I 'm going to do it. For me, special!"

Meanwhile Barnum, who had been going from place to place in Coppered Jack, met Barnquist and the Ox Bow clan at the Thimble Belt. The whispered report he gave Barney seemed to please, for a grin of satisfaction wreathed the lips of the young cattle princeling. He dismissed Barnum.

"It 's all right; when th' time comes, you grab Lars. He 's *on.*"

Barnum gave Barnquist a wink of appreciation and went out to spread the news of the finding of the proofs against Aguilar. He buttonholed the younger men of Coppered Jack and informed them what had been found at the Chaparral Cock. In almost every case growls against "the greaser" were heard.

Ox Bovians now circulated, while their mounts rested against the Thimble Belt's tie-rail or lazed in the wagon yard. Behind them the fever in the public mind swelled, burned ever more and more fierce.

A little later word came, by a rider from San Felicé, that Harvison, called down to the farthest tip of the county on a stage hold-up case, would not be in until late in the day, perhaps not until night. This, passed to Barnquist, made him smile behind one casually upheld hand, so placed as if to hide a yawn.

Ed Burlane, hearing of the excitement, came shouldering through the crowd about the Thimble Belt. He laid an ear to the talk that was toward and noted that it dealt with the Mexican only. He twitched Pardee aside and put the question to him, straight:

"Man to man, Pardee, is this just for the Mexican's sake? You-all ain't hidin' no projects against Peters, are you?"

"Why, no, son," Pardee answered. "Not a word said so far, except 'bout this slippery Aguilar."

Although chief of the surly Ox Bow clan, Pardee had the reputation of being square himself, and Ed felt obliged to be satisfied. But he went to Maltrane, still tiptilted against the gaol wall, his deputy by now at his side. This man, a partisan of Harvison's, named Ambrose Gallagher,

was plainly uneasy, but Lars brushed his uneasiness aside with:

"They ain't goin' to rush this man's jail, no, siree, Bob. They all know well that I 'll shoot — if I have to."

But he looked to his six-guns, nevertheless, for off toward the Thimble Belt the racket was increasing, and an occasional shot was to be heard as some over-exuberant man let off a cartridge into the upper air.

Ed hastened back to tell Berenice what was afoot and found her, already informed, on the point of going out to seek for him.

"Is it serious?" she asked, from the Wickson doorway.

"No, I don't think so. You remember they shot their wad like this yesterday and went home without firing a gun. But, if you say so, I 'll go down to the calaboose and watch."

"I reckon we 'd better all go," Pap Wickson called from the house. "I heard what you was a-sayin' to her, Ed. I 'll beat up some of th' Old Timers, an' we 'll be on hand, if so-be anythin' busts wide open."

Pap came out, spry and wiry, his old frontier six bobbing on his left hip, butt to front, where the right hand could clutch it easily.

"She 's some ancient," and he patted her butt, "but she 's deadly when she speaks."

Off down to the saloon zone the shots were get-

ting more and more frequent; the " yipyi-i-i-i-is " more pronounced. Spurred on by this, Pap Wickson began to gather his men.

Ed, nervous still, bade Berenice go indoors, promising to go to the gaol and to remain there, pending Pap's arrival.

As he turned to go toward the calaboose, there came a swirl of yelling men out of the Thimble Belt. They swung up on to horses, helter-skelter, and were off toward the jail, Barnquist on his huge, scudding roan, and Pardee leading.

Ed, unmounted, ran. He knew the mob would be at the calaboose long before he could catch, saddle and mount a Peters horse, and be there, minutes also before he could arrive by running. But he ran, none the less, — ran hard, jerking out his guns as he loped.

Barnum, voluble, boastful, playing his part, was in the van when the yelling group came abreast the calaboose. Maltrane came down on to all-fours of his chair with a bang, almost jarring the rough board seat to bits. He snapped erect and faced them.

" Now, what? " he snarled, poised on tiptoes.

Several men swung down, Barnum leading. Pardee was near at hand and Barnquist also came among the leaders.

Barnum, swaggering up in confident, braggadocio, thrust his face forward. Weaver was seen to edge toward the side of the gaol where the

lone window was. Barnum leered at Lars Maltrane.

"We wants that greaser, Lars," he bellowed.

"You 're whirlin' a big loop to-day, Barnum," Maltrane drawled, his voice acid, his eyes pinpointed as the thin lids drew over them, and his thin lips tightened over his white teeth.

"You bet," Barnum cried happily, the effects of the last Thimble Belt drink not yet evaporated; "an' whatever, we want that greaser."

"I heard such talk yest'day," Lars grated. His eyes swept them all, and at the glance several of the more sober drew back, such was the power of his gaze to daunt those of lesser breed.

"You hear it ag'in now, an' we mean it," Pardee said.

"You, Alec, you keep back. I don't want to shoot you up."

"You goin' to shoot it out?" Barney asked. "No use. Some of us 'll get you, Lars. Give us th' Mexican."

"No; I 'm first dep'ty o' San Felicé now, not your man, Barney. You keep back, too."

Barnum, leering, winking, inched slowly forward.

"Buck up, Barnum; show your spunk," Barney urged aloud. Then, in a low aside, "Jump him; he won't shoot. It 's all fixed."

"You give us th' Mex, or we 'll have t' shoot it out wit' you, Lars," Barnum insisted, inching still

forward. His hands were not weaponward, so Maltrane merely smiled.

"Yiii-ipp!" some one in the crowd let off a shrill cry.

"You better do business; Pap Wickson an' some old-timers is comin'," Weaver, mounted, called.

"An' that Burlane duck, he 's comin' on th' run. Mus' be they 're feared we 're after old Peters," another yelled.

"Gallagher, you stick it out, if I go down," Maltrane flung over his shoulder. "Slide inside an' bar th' door."

Gallagher started to obey. A flask from some one in the crowd came hurtling over, to fell Gallagher neatly. He flopped down, rolled over to the side of the door and was silent. He had only inserted the key in the lock — not turned it.

At that, Maltrane, eyes on the bottle-thrower, reached toward his guns. Barney had his lips almost at Barnum's ear:

"Now, Barnum," from Barnquist; "it 's all a bluff."

Barnum, low-crouched, sprang. So sudden was his move that it had all but succeeded, as Maltrane was watching for gun-play, for hands to stray weaponward, not for hand-to-hand work. But, as the yell over Barnum's move filled the air, as the dupe was within a foot, it seemed, of his intended victim, the gunman's quicksilver-like

muscles had glided and writhed, — and the gun spat — *once!*

Barnum spun around, upright, a neat hole in his forehead, on his face a look of intense surprise. He staggered toward Barnquist, his arm outstretched accusingly, a menacing forefinger waving, then fell prone.

"I told you I 'd shoot it out," Maltrane said crisply. *" Who next? "*

The terror of the man's prowess daunted them for a moment. It was Pardee who recovered first and cried:

" Come on, boys; he 's killed an Ox Bow man tryin' to keep a dirty greaser f'om bein' lynched."

They flung themselves from their horses and began to creep in. Maltrane, erect, his back to the gaol door, snarled at them:

" Yes, c'm on, all Ox Bow and all Coppered Jack. I 'll shoot it out with all."

A shout near by told of the approach of Burlane.

" Keep 'em off, Maltrane."

Shots of intimidation began to pop over Lars' head, the lead thudding into the door's lintel. Barnquist yelled, — but did not shoot.

By now all Coppered Jack was swarming gaolward, it seemed.

CHAPTER XXII

"FOR ME, SPECIAL!!"

AND now, terror-riven, the voice of Aguilar could be heard inside:

"*Merci,* Señors!"

Death-fear had stripped him of his viper-like poise. He was crying for the mercy he never had shown to others.

Peters boomed: "Stand to th' rack, Mex, an' quit whinin', for them wolves outside don't know that kind o' talk."

But yet the more he pleaded:

"*Merci,* Señors!"

"The Mexican, the greaser," the mob yelled.

"Peters, too," Barnquist roared, throwing off the mask at last.

"Yes, Peters, too," Pardee echoed, in faithful-retainer wise.

"Peters, too —"

"Yip-y-ippp!"

"You shot your wad that time," Maltrane yelled at Barney. "It 's all a fake to kill Peters, eh? You might bump off a greaser but not a son

of a Native Son. Keep back! It 's not yo'r gun-fighter, but th' fi'st dep'ty o' San Felicé that 's a-looking at you, Barnquist. *Ah, would you — back!*"

His guns swung in line with Barnquist.

Nearer came the yells of the Old Timers and of Burlane. Events were now hardly quarter-heartbeats apart.

"*Merci,* Señors — the window — ah, the window, Señors!" So the Mexican.

"*Bang, bang!*"

A shuddering wail, a bare quarter second of silence, then some one cried out:

"*Weaver 's plugged him, through th' window.*"

They drew back — a bare hesitancy — but it was enough, for Maltrane, like a cat, had reached behind him, even with one gun in the hand he so used and, fingering the door's key, that Gallagher had inserted before being felled by the flask, yes, fingering it over the trigger-guard of the gun, had the door unlocked before they could fix attention upon him, — and then he was gone!

It had all taken place so quickly that Maltrane had locked the door inside before they could come to their senses.

"To th' window; part of you jaw in front with those old fools that are coming," Barnquist ordered. "We 'll get Peters from there. While they hold 'em in front, we can side-wind on Lars f'om th' window."

At that word they swirled about the gaol's corner, to find Weaver there, his gun smoking, his head below the window's sill, out of line of fire. He motioned them from the window, spluttering into his pipe's stem, the bowl dropping embers on to his shirt front as he did so.

"I got th' greaser, cold turkey," he cried, over the tumult the impact of Burlane and the Old Timers made upon the screening party before the calaboose. The yells and demands of them came floating around the building's smoke-wreathed corner.

"And Peters?" Barney asked.

"I can't see him."

"We 'll make a jump for th' window, all together, put our guns in, an' let go," Pardee suggested.

"Into th' corners," Barney ordered.

Out in front the din increased. There were no shots, — just cries and demands. The screening party was doing its part well.

"Now," Barney ordered.

They sprang, bodies low, hands stretched toward the window space. Their hands eagerly plunged over the sill, their guns spat. At first answering shots came; spurts of blood showed on stricken men. They shot and shot, by turns, and then all was still inside. The commotion out front increased. Pardee, turning from emptying his gun, bawled:

"C'm on, Barney; he 's huddled in a heap in th' corner near th' door. My gun's empty. You shoot. You ain't shot yet — "

Clatter of hooves on the road! And a booming call:

"What 's doing? In the name o' th' law — "

"Harvison — an' his posse, by hell's bells," Pardee said.

The screening party about the corner near the door gave way. Men edged back, the Old Timers greeted the sheriff eagerly.

"Where 's Lars, my dep'ty? " he demanded.

"In th' calaboose," some one called.

"Dead? "

"No one was n't after him; we was after the Mexican hoss thief."

"Oh," with an expression of contempt.

He swung down and shouldered past them. He shook the door, called:

"Lars, Maltrane! "

There was no reply. Then a groan, a choking groan.

"Break in that door, men," Harvison ordered.

Mighty shoulders came against it. The stout door strained, then burst inward, and they swirled in.

In a corner was Aguilar, crumpled, still. And in that corner most sheltered from the window was a huddled heap. They pulled it apart. . . .

On top was Lars Maltrane, his body arched

over that of Peters. A scalp wound had rendered Peters merely and mercifully unconscious. But Maltrane, still breathing, clearly was in worse case.

"Carry me out — into th' air," he pleaded, as soon as his ears had caught Harvison's voice. "Take me out, Sheriff — th' prisoner, th' one that counts, is safe — I turn him over to you — I did my duty 's fi'st dep'ty — "

They carried him forth into the air and laid him down on the trampled earth. Peters, staggering out, half recovered, fell into the arms of Berenice, who, white-lipped, came from the crowd's fringe at a run to receive him.

"Father, are you hurt much?" she asked.

"Not much, Berenice, not much."

"Is that you' girl a-talkin', Peters?" Lars called, his head on Harvison's knee.

"Yes, Lars."

"I want to see her — a bit."

He coughed, spat blood, froth.

"Go to him," her father said, pushing her forward.

Berenice, as the crowd drew back, went quickly to the stricken man and bent over him. His eyes, not agate-like now, dwelt on her fresh young face.

"Harvison," he said hollowly, "you listen t' me. This lynchin' bee was all cooked up to get Peters, under cover o' gettin' th' Mexican. I

made one fool play when I shot Barnum, for he might o' told what was in my gun, 'stead o' bullets, when old Barnquist was shot. It 's queer bus'ness all th' way, Old Timer!"

He paused for breath. Horses stamped, spurs jingled; saddle leather creaked.

"Seeing eye to eye with death, as I am, I think young Barney killed his father, under cover o' that shootin' in th' Thimble Belt, same 's he planned to scrag Peters under cover o' gettin' the Mexican."

"It 's a lie," Barney yelled, starting forward. "I 've not shot my gun once; been tryin' to keep my men in bounds. See; my gun 's cold — clean."

"Ride easy, now, young cock," Harvison warned his hand dropping to his gun's butt; "ride easy now. Put 'way you' fool gun — "

"He *all*-ways has a gun t' fit his alibi," Pardee snarled.

"I 'm a-goin' out now, folks," Maltrane coughed; "bend over, Miss Ber'nice. I got something to say to you."

The girl dropped to her knees and leaned over. He gazed up at her, his eyes dimming. His voice came faintly:

"They hit your dad in there. He dropped in th' corner, in plain sight o' th' window. I could have shot it clean out with them — killed some — but he 'd been shot sure, then. I jumped in

front o' him — took th' fire for him — I liked th' cake — special — for me — special for me — thanks!"

The agate eyes closed; the thin lids came over them wearily; the thin brows were in a straight hair-line above them, and on the thin lips was the ghost of a smile, — and so the man-killer died.

"I got a word to say, you Ox Bow men," Harvison jerked out, his eyes roaming up from the dead man's face to the faces of the living. "My first dep'ty 's been slain here. Some o' you did it. I got to sift this thing. I can't jail you all. But your names are known, an' most of you 're not over-important. It 's the leaders I want. Barnquist," whirling on Barney so suddenly as to take him off guard, "is it fight, or give in?"

Barnquist swept his eyes over the faces of his followers. He saw there now no lust for battle. The realities were pressing home on them. They were each and severally uneasy for their own safety. And to the Old Timers were joined now their friends, and the decent element of Coppered Jack was ready to join with the posse. Gallagher, restored to consciousness, was ready to fight anew. Harvison spat. He glanced at Pardee inquiringly. Then at Burlane who, edging toward Barnquist, plainly had hostile intentions. The sheriff nodded to Ed.

"No jury 'll punish us much for bumpin' off a Mexican hoss thief," Pardee snarled.

"No," Harvison admitted. "I suppose not. But I got to hold some of you. There 's Lars to account for yet. An' Peters was shot, cold turkey. He 's on'y wounded, but 't was done while he was under protection o' th' law. But Lars' case is worst." He pointed to the stark form. Berenice had arisen to go to her father, leaving the useless clay by itself, the thin smile still on its lips.

"You 'll find me out at Ox Bow, when wanted," Barney blustered.

"In the calaboose, you mean," and a strong arm circled his neck, snapping his chin back. A gun stared him in the face — Burlane's. Ed had worked to Barney's side as the sheriff talked with him.

"If an Ox Bow moves, I 'll shoot," he called, "or any one else."

Step by step, while they watched, he forced the daunted man to the portal, sent him spinning inside with a single heave of his big shoulder. Then he clanged the door to and faced the sheriff.

"You did that darned well, Young Timer," Harvison approved. "Now you follow him, Pardee."

Pardee went to the door — and inside, as well, without delay.

"Now Weaver," Harvison called.

Folk glanced about. Weaver was not to be seen. Some one remembered that at the first ap-

pearance of the posse he had edged to the outer fringe of the throng. Clearly he was gone.

A half dozen more Ox Bovians were engaoled speedily. The others, as less directly implicated, Harvison turned loose, bidding them go out to the ranch and take charge, pending developments. A party was told off to carry Lars Maltrane's body into the center of town, to the Thimble Belt saloon.

"And now," said the sheriff, turning to Peters, "you can't go in there with them; you just nacherly can't do it. They'd do so'thin' to you. You come with me. I 'll see what 's to be done with you."

He clanked away toward the town's center. A few deputies of the posse took charge of the horses; others scattered to look for Weaver. Peters followed the sheriff.

Ed took Berenice's arm, and they trailed her father. All Coppered Jack was minded for homegoing, as well, and soon a living stream of people was flowing toward the town's center.

Before the saloon a breathless deputy rode up to inform Harvison that a boy in the wagon yard had informed him that Weaver but a few moments before had gone into the yard, taken his own horse, a good one, and Barney Barnquist's big roan and ridden, as he said, for Ox Bow.

"That roan is the best on these ranges," Harvison said with regret, "and if he 's gone on him,

he 's gone, at least for a while, with this start. But we 'll nip him later, p'r'aps when I get reward circulars out by mail."

"He 'd be caught, if I had my old Midnight," Ed thought with regret, as he turned away with Berenice, after Harvison had said to Peters:

"I 'm going to go into th' Eagle Short Order for a bite, Peters, an' you got to come, too. I 'm goin' to keep you with me till this is over, one way or 'nuther."

"You 're welcome t' my company, if you can stand it, Harv," Peters answered with a laugh.

He waved a good-by to Berenice and Ed — a cheerful good-by. Then he followed Harvison into the Eagle.

They sat down inside. Harvison rapped on one of the rough tables. Came then the whisk of soft feet and a dark-haired, red-cheeked girl to serve.

"Why, bless my eyes, it 's th' lil breed girl," Harvison greeted her.

"Yes, it is Ess-Way," timidly.

Her face, for all its wild beauty, showed lines of care. Her eyes she kept cast down.

"I thought you were out to Ox Bow — "

"No; Bar*nee,* he drove mother and Ess-Way out — "

"So? " regarding her keenly.

"Yes, an' it was a plumb scandal, after all th' years Greasewood Kate served them out there,"

Peters said angrily. He had heard of the event through Berenice.

The girl took their order and went out. They heard short, sharp words out behind the cook's screen, mingled with the splutter of frying meat, the bubble of a boiling kettle. The girl spoke; then the woman — one pleading, the other insistent. Suddenly from behind the screen Greasewood Kate came, the girl's hand fast-gripped. She stormed up to Harvison.

"Shereef, you ask my girl what she feend in hole in dhee wall in dhat Bar*nee's* room in Ox Bow."

She thrust the reluctant girl forward.

"What was it, Ess-Way?" Harvison encouraged kindly.

"I would n't tell, eef Bar*nee* love me," she sobbed, breaking down; "but he keel my heart; he put my mother out — "

"Yes, what did you find?"

"Night beefore old boss is shot, I peek in Bar*nee's* door. He often kiss me in dhee hall."

Her face flushed. Her mother shook her angrily.

"Yes, hon; go on," Peters said eagerly.

"You tell dhee shereef," her mother urged. "Eef Bar*nee,* he stuck by us, we 'd never tell."

"I peek in door," Ess-Way continued. "Bar*nee,* hee 's workin' on ca'tridges. See," clutching her bosom and dragging forth a silken bag

that she cast on to the table before them. "Look in dhere, Shereef."

The two men clawed the bag open. Pellets rattled out: an empty .38 shell, balls for a .45, evidently pried from a lot of cartridges; some black, lead-like stuff that Harvison fingered.

"He put dhem in hole in wall back of hees stand in hees room," Ess-Way said. "I saw heem — I got dheem nex' day, w'en he rides away. I heard heem and hees father talk — they wanted to keel thees Peters old man, but ol' Barnquista, he was shoot, dhat taime."

Harvison started up, fingering that pellet of black stuff yet. His eyes blazed:

"I see it now," he flashed; "the dirty gun of Maltrane; filled with fake bullets; so that Peters would be left alive to take th' blame; Barney, he shot his dad down, but why?"

"Dhey all-taime quarr'l 'bout money," Greasewood Kate informed. "A'm hearin' dheem, all-taime. Bar*nee*, he runs to Chaparral Cock — wants cash money."

"We 're gettin' warm now. The right man is in the calaboose this time. Peters, you c'n go home, giving me your parole to remain inside San Felicé till wanted. I 'm goin' out to double th' guard at th' jail. I don't want no fake rescues or lynchings or any more funny tricks."

Clutching the bag, in which he had replaced the bullets and the bits of leaded soap, Harvison

swung outdoors, leaving Peters to go to Pap Wickson's to break the good news to both Berenice and Burlane.

Later still a deputy rode to bring Coroner Alberstone for the inquest which, Harvison announced, would be held on the morrow, both on the death of the elder Barnquist and that of Lars Maltrane.

CHAPTER XXIII

WEAVER SPLUTTERS AGAIN

WEAVER, who had lived a mere shade in a Barnquist's shadow for so many years, had about him a certain dog-like loyalty or rather wolf-like adhesion to the chief of his pack. As Maltrane had been the gun-arm of the elder Barnquist, Weaver had been the faithful messenger, the second man. He had fetched and carried, cleaned the guns of Barnquist, acted the humble squire to the border master of miles and men and thousands of horned cattle.

That a Barnquist should be in the calaboose was to Weaver a thing unheard of. The calaboose was for wastrels, town drunkards, not for free lords of thousands and thousands of acres! Weaver was not conscious of the growing force of law and order, of the turn of events toward a newer day. He was a survivor of the old days of pure gun law. It seemed to him that all that was needed to set the world right was to have Barney out, at the head of the Ox Bow clan again, that he might overawe Harvison and name some

one, perchance Weaver, as first deputy of that part of San Felicé. He had seen old Barnquist bluff range sheriffs before with the threat of Ox Bow votes and guns, — why not the new one?

It was with such ideas swirling in his narrow brain that he had left the calaboose just before he had been called for. Making his way behind the line of buildings, he had emerged at the wagon yard, taken his own horse and the big roan and made off. He rode the roan and led the other, and as his own horse was a good one, on account of Weaver's need for speed in his many long rides about Ox Bow business, he made good time away from Coppered Jack.

He knew better than to go to Ox Bow then, or to any inhabited place. The ground was dry; he left little sign that would not be cut by cattle. At times he struck into their well-beaten paths, zigzagged in apparent aimlessness. Before dusk he had ridden far and seen no signs of pursuers. He snugged down atop a higher roll than common in the uneven country a bit southwest of the irrigation ditches. He was counting that the pursuit would be toward Vernon and to the south, Old Mexico. That he would remain close to Coppered Jack was hardly to be considered and it was not, for the search that night did swerve wide of the man the deputies sought.

When the dark was fully come, Weaver, chew-

ing his pipestem methodically, tethered the horses and stole off toward the main trail, which he struck well out toward Twin Springs.

He was in quest of news, and the glow of a campfire told him of Soda Lake teamsters and possible opportunity to eavesdrop to advantage. The teamsters would be careless, fearing no danger. The Indian menace had ceased to worry, following the Comanche settlement; there were only hold-ups to be apprehended, and as teamsters were notoriously short of cash, road agents would not bother them. So teamsters set no watch and spent many hours in gossip.

Thus it was that Weaver had no difficulty in worming his way close to the fire, and as the teamsters were discussing events in Coppered Jack, he picked up the news that had followed his own departure. The seriousness of the case against Barney rather shook the old wolf's determination for a moment, but the announcement that the inquest had been set for one o'clock next day, if Alberstone arrived in time, and was to be in the Thimble Belt, the largest single room in Coppered Jack, consoled him, for it gave him a plan, especially as the teamsters' gossip represented Coppered Jack as quieted down for the night.

Long use and habit had given to Weaver a certain degree of courage. He had been through so many affrays that he had discounted danger

as affecting himself and so was ready to take whatever chances were part of the scheme that sprang into being in his mind as he crept away from the teamsters' fire.

He circled out and then back and struck the trail again. He kept to the side of it cautiously, avoiding the sleeping-hutches of the Mexican laborers along the irrigation works.

The night had grown very dark before Weaver neared the calaboose. He could hear the deputies on guard talking in low tones. The calaboose was familiar to Weaver, who often had acted as guard there, companying Maltrane while the gunman had been holding some culprit against the sheriff's coming. He expected to find the door, the window, well guarded, and they were, as his ears told him, judging by the talk of the guards. The back and one side had no openings that were known to the general run of Coppered Jack folk.

There was, however, a certain crack in the wall at the darkest corner of the big single room,— a crack at which Weaver had practiced spitting to relieve the monotony of night vigils when he and Maltrane had sat up inside, playing cards while guarding some very dangerous prisoner. It was right near the head of the calaboose's single cot, and Weaver was sure that the Ox Bow men would yield the cot to Barney and bunk down on the earthen floor themselves for the night. In

such case, if he could win to the calaboose wall, he might be able to get the ear of the Ox Bow heir and concert plans with him.

He listened for a long time, well back from the gaol. The guards were whispering, story-telling. He heard one report that the prisoners were all asleep — except Barnquist — and that all seemed quiet. After that they were more and more lax. Snores from the calaboose's interior told of tired men giving way to fatigue in real earnest.

Presently a San Felicé *raconteur* launched into a long tale of how he and others, in their more hectic days, had shot up the faro bank at Tumencaro, and the guards drew in closer to listen. Weaver, under cover of a burst of subdued laughter, crept forward. Another point in the tale, laughter-punctuated, enabled him to edge farther in and to note that the lone guard on the windowless side of the gaol was leaning around the corner, intent, not upon duty, but upon the story that was going forward to a highly spiced climax. Weaver wriggled to the place where he expected to find the crack, found it by feeling and glued his lips to it. He called:

"Barney — hist!"

The story was going on and on, laughter rewarding the teller at each new chapter.

"Barney!" Weaver whispered through the crack.

The guard at the corner shifted, and Weaver thought for a moment he was turning back toward him, but he merely was leaning farther around, the better to hear.

"Barney!"

"What is it — where are you, Weav?" came back through the crack.

Weaver flattened himself to earth, inwardly rejoicing.

"I 'm outside; feel for the crack just at the head o' th' cot."

"I got it. Are you alone?"

"Yes; I got th' big roan hid out an' my own pinto hoss. Want to make a break?"

"I 'd not get far now, Weav, with all th' guards ready t' shoot."

"I know, but to-morrow, say. Listen to my plan."

"All right, Weav."

The laughter heightened as the story came to a new point of cowboy humor. The leaning guard had all but edged around the corner, out of sight.

"They 're goin' to hold th' inquest to-morrow, in th' Thimble Belt."

"Yes?"

"I figger, same 's other times, that Harvison an' Alberstone will line up in th' back o' th' big room."

"Yes, like they always do."

"Yes, Barney, an' you, as one o' th' pris'ners, 'll be right there wi' them. Savvy?"

"Yes."

"P'r'aps right by th' door to that back room and that opens on to th' alley."

"Yes," eagerly.

"They 'll be late comin' to order, like. Ever' one an' his dawg will be there, pushin' an' shovin' out in front. Th' back door 'll be locked, as usual, 'cause Harvison don't ever want no rescues or lynchin' parties from th' rear. Savvy?"

"I 'm comin' to it."

"But I 've got a key to that back door. It was handy for us t' use — you' dad an' I. Harvison 'll have a lone guard out there — to keep th' few town's kids off, like. I 'll come into town, down th' back way, when ever' one 's taken up wi' th' inquest. You know how 't will be — ever' inch before an' to th' sides o' th' Thimble Belt will be crowded, them inside passin' word to them outside — ever' one scrougin' for'ard —

"You be ready — in th' chair near th' back-room door, if so-be you c'n manage it, in th' shufflin' an' pushin' when you-all file in. I rides up th' back alley, leadin' th' big roan, casual-like. It 'll be sich a fool play no one 'll be lookin' for it. It 's got a chance in its favor, Barney. I 'll whirl down on that guard at th' back door, an' at th' crack o' my gun, you jump f'r th' back room, slam its door behin' you, then to th' back door — I 'll

be to it, key in lock, an' swing it open. As you jump out, I 'll shet th' door, lock it, an' while they batter at th' inside and folks jamboree in between th' buildin's, tryin' to find out what 's broke loose, we 'll go, hell-for-leather, up th' alley — it 's a long chance — but onct you get out an' to Ox Bow, th' boys 'll rally to you. You 're th' head, Barnquist, yit, by gripes, an' once in th' saddle you c'n ride it out wi' th' hull b'ilin' o' sheriffs an' sich."

His spluttering whisper trailed off. He waited. Then came the answer:

"All right, Weaver; I 'll make it out, just 's you say."

"Remember, at th' crack o' my gun — "

"O. K."

A loud guffaw from the listening deputies told of the end of the tale. The man at the corner edged back, with evident intent to take up the interrupted pacing of his beat back and forth along the dark side of the gaol.

Weaver, fox-like, belly to earth, melted into the umbers of the nearer shadows, — was gone.

Barnquist remained quiet after Weaver had gone, his mind busy on the events that had led up to his present condition.

He had no illusions. He knew the peril that he faced. He had heard from Harvison, with outward bravado but with inward raging, of the way in which the Indian girl had eavesdropped

on him and revealed what she had seen and knew of in her rage against him for casting her off. That had battered his defense, he knew. Up to that moment there had been suspicion against him, perhaps. Lars Maltrane's dying denunciation was only based on belief. Barnum, who knew of the origin of the soapy, greasy dirt on the mirror, was gone, slain in artful fashion by Barney's malign plan, yet by the hand of Lars, openly shown—and in defense of a jailed prisoner. Maltrane, who might have told of the discrepancy between Barney's public weaponry and private, was gone as well. The plot to kill Peters, under cover of the lynching of the Mexican, had been a good one, but Lars had spoiled that. Once Peters had been disposed of, Barney, in his swelling egoism, had planned to marry Berenice in some rough border fashion, or else get her out of the way, that Twin Springs might escheat to the State and so be open to lease by such as had wide influence, like the owner of Ox Bow. And then a limitless horizon of pleasure would open up before him. But now—

The heavy breathing of the men about him told of the end of his career. They, his best men, were engaoled; his prestige was broken. A Barnquist had been tainted by the touch of the law's finger. Barnquist knew that the old wild days were passing; that to north, east and west the great ranges were being cut up; that the faro

banks were being left vacant or closed; that the newer era was being ushered in. His father, in other days, might have gathered a small army of retainers about him and overset the law's machinery and mastered the situation; but he, falling upon softer times, could not.

"No, Weaver," he thought at the last, "I 'll not go to Ox Bow, but south into Old Mexico. I 'll go broken in pocket, but I 've youth, health, and may be able to make something of myself yet in Old Mexico."

The despair he had felt earlier in the night gave way to a burning, fierce anger against Peters, against Burlane, who had mastered him in the presence of the crowd and of Harvison — against all and sundry. He longed, with an avid, consuming longing, to injure some one, to destroy, to vent all the evil, wild impulses of his deep, forceful nature upon some one, some thing.

"If only I could hurt them; tear them," he raved inwardly. "If I could ride my big roan over them, trample them — ah — "

Tremors of rage shook him. He half started up — to fall back again, shuddering with anger, as he repressed his wilder reflexes at the call of that inner monitor that whispered:

"Be careful and to-morrow you may mount the big roan and go, to return some day and perhaps triumph over those who now have you down — "

"*Ah* — "

He relaxed, breathed deeply. His gaolers, outside, were chatting freely again. And he was inside, a prisoner. If he paid the law's debt, distant relatives would own Ox Bow; strangers would sit in his seat, hardly warm yet after his father's death!

So his black soul, bereft of its usual stays and props of adulation and boughten praise, drank to the dregs the cup of humiliation.

CHAPTER XXIV

HAPPINESS DEFERRED

Up betimes, Harvison clattered to the jail, to find all well, in seeming. The prisoners were quiet; Barnquist apparently had accepted the situation. He affected not to hold a grudge against Harvison and to be able, in due time, to explain away all that seemed against him.

Harvison, not a little worried underneath at having been compelled, by force of circumstances, to hold the heir of Ox Bow, was glad that Barney was so minded. To administer his office fairly well, to hunt down the small offenders relentlessly, to palter about the edges of big things, was Harvison's limit. When forced, he could act with promptitude, yet he always had in mind the day of reckoning — election day — and hoped to continue in office. There was no dodging the situation that was now on his hands, though, and he knew that he must face the outcome and play square with the public. Which took on added zest from the fact that by so doing he smashed Ox Bow's prestige and would be reëlected.

At noon, Coroner Alberstone came racking in

from San Felicé on his comfortable cayuse and approved the plan for the inquest at one o'clock in the Thimble Belt. Together he and Harvison adjourned there to set the stage — place chairs, tables and make things easy for the public to see and hear, to the extent of the saloon's accommodations. Harvison himself locked the rear door, according to custom, and placed on guard there, at a half after noon, a lone deputy who, assuming a bored expression, guaranteed to keep any one from venturing in by that way.

Alberstone, who went to see the prisoners, brought back word that Barnquist wished for no delays; that he looked upon the inquest as preliminary only, and that he would have plenty of lawyers to defend him at the regular trial in Vernon. This statement confirmed Harvison and Alberstone in the belief that the inquest was to be a mere formality and that Barnquist was relying upon his money and the prestige of the Barnquist name to secure acquittal in the higher courts. That Barney should take this view Harvison set down to his lack of experience, for the sheriff, like all the others with whom the accused had come into contact, had entirely misjudged the depths of Barnquist's being, setting him down as a scatterbrained young fool, spoiled by possession of money and power. The attempt at lynching had confirmed this belief.

Learning early what the plans for the day were,

Berenice asked her father to drive her out to Twin Springs for one of her usual inspections of the place. She would not be a witness at the inquest, Harvison had told her upon inquiry; and she did not share the morbid curiosity of the generality in regard to such things.

"I got to stay close, Harvison says," her father told her; "mebbe Ed might drive you out."

Ed, sounded, proved willing, very willing. He got the buckboard ready and the sober Peters ponies hitched. They started, past the Thimble Belt, the Eagle Short Order, where Greasewood Kate waved a greeting to them; past wagon yard and finally past calaboose. From the window Barney saw them go, and he could barely repress a scowl at sight of them, chatting, laughing, as the ponies jogged.

Out on the trail the goodness of their first carefree day since they had met came to them like a balm. Harvison's manner pointed to the relief of Peters from the charge, and the troubles of the Twin Springs folk seemed at an end now. The ponies shacked along, contented. A dun hawk wheeled above, a road runner raced ahead of the ponies. A stray wisp of the girl's warm hair, jostled loose by the buckboard's swaying, blew across Ed's face. She sighed happily.

"Miss Ber'nice," and his free hand stole over to rest on her two, crossed on her lap.

She started, glanced at him, smiled happily.

"Yes, *Ed.*"

It was the first time she had used his first name with such eager warmth! The music of it sank into his heart's depths.

"Miss Ber'nice — now 't your dad 's out o' trouble, like, an' ever'thin' seems O. K., I got something to say to you, especial — "

"Wait, Ed," she said, low, sweet, compelling; "wait. It 's all so wonderful, so good — and I 'm only a girl, yet — I know what it is, Ed, you want to say — I know what I 'm going to answer — "

"Miss Ber'nice," his hand closed warmer and closer about hers clasped on the lap of her faded calico. His eyes swept in the purity of her, the inclusive charm of her and the cheap hat, the stubbed-out shoes: he 'd deck her out like a queen —

"Don't, Ed, let 's wait — till to-morrow. Just a girl's whim. I 'd like to think about you all day long and dream about what may be — oh, let me wait — "

He pressed her hands together in a gentle love-grip, spoke to the ponies, then to her:

"Yes, lil girl, I 'll wait — years, if you want. If I c'n get you — an' old Midnight — back some day — Say, Ber'nice, we 're goin' to be happy, eh? "

Her eyes, swimming with love-lights, answered him.

They found all safe at Twin Springs. Berenice bustled about the house at small tasks. Ed, lolling in the open doorway, smoked and watched her over one shoulder at times; at others he looked away off into the dim and tranquil distance, his thoughts in a maze of gold-shot daydreams, in which she was the central figure.

They had an early meal, over which she had lingered in preparation, their first love-feast together. He made no reference to what was in both their minds, and she kept her sweet reserve, which was to him an added charm. To have her thus, within reach, to know she was his, yet to withhold his hand, was sweeter, then, than possession, he felt, for he had the fine-grained soul of the native Texan, the innate courtesy to womankind, the yearning for the decent, the clean things.

He left her at noon to drive in, the understanding being that he would return at dusk for her. There were many little things about the house that she wanted to do, — such things as a woman prizes in the doing and that her heart told her should be done if she and Ed —

He kissed her hand — the veriest breath of a kiss — at parting, with mock deference that held in it the proof of the real. She laughed with a catch of joy akin to pain in her throat at the touch of his lips, and would have held him had he been less prompt in turning to leap into the seat of

the buckboard. A crack of the whip — and he was gone, with a cheery farewell phrase. She turned and went indoors, her eyes swimming in happy tears.

With a light heart, a thankful spirit, Berenice went tripping about the place. There were a few veteran hens and a cock to be looked after; not that they needed food, for they practically ran wild, but there might be eggs, or varmints might have poached on them. Berenice sought out all the nesting places, brought in an apronful of fresh eggs and placed them in a basket in the kitchen. She dusted, swept, laid wood for the supper fire.

Then, all tasks completed, she went for a ramble about the old place and, finding many of her flowers in bloom, made up an armful for her mother's grave.

She wanted to go to the grave, too, for another reason. She wanted there to commune with the spirit of the one who had been her guiding star and to tell over, in her heart, beside the green mound near the tinkling waters of the springs close to the willows, the words, the phrases that Burlane had used during their ride out that morning. The experience had been so sweet, so satisfying that she wanted to treasure it.

She found the wonted place and cleared the mound of weeds that enforced neglect had permitted to grow there. She made it all fresh and

pure again, then placed her floral offerings at the shrine of mother's love. Then she sat down and, telling over, in tender summing up, the pleasures of the morning, fell into a daydream, precious, heart-refreshing.

She did not reason about her new happiness; she simply accepted it, thankfully, as a boon from above.

"Oh, Mother," she said aloud; "I am so happy, so happy."

A mocker scolded at her, then, finding no harm, came to bathe in the margin of the runlet at the spring's brink. A gopher, fat-pouched, went shyly past to drink.

It was too early for Ed, but she suddenly heard the thrum of hooves, not those of the sedate ponies, but those of a great, a huge horse, man-ridden, her border-trained ears told her. "Who can it be?" she wondered. Then she got up and went through the screen of the willows, hoping it was Ed, for some reason coming on horseback.

Ed, homing to Wickson's, told Peters of Berenice's decision to remain at the Springs all day. It seemed safe enough! There was no one to do her harm there; she could take care of herself in ordinary circumstances.

Ed took off his guns, hung them up in the Wickson kitchen, by the shelf over the sink, and went to the inquest, where all feet were tending

in Coppered Jack. He left the guns because the sheriff would expect all arms to be out of sight, save those of himself and posse, while the orderly processes of the law were functioning during the inquest.

Ed delayed outside until he saw the prisoners coming. The deputies, on either hand, were chatting with the captives. Ox Bow men were not in evidence, Harvison having sent word over to the big ranch for them to stay away that day or shoot it out. The sheriff meant to have nó attempts at rescue. Word had come back that none of them would come; in fact, many had left quietly during the night for Vernon, giving out that it was merely for a few days.

"I don't care if a few o' th' hirelin's do vamoose," Harvison smiled. "Th' fewer we have 'bout th' better, till this storm blows over."

A deputy sent back to visit the lone guard there reported that all was quiet in the alley, except that he had shooed a few youngsters away.

The prisoners filed into the big barroom, Harvison clanking at their head, Alberstone bringing up the rear. Barney, vigilant, alert, kept his face under perfect control.

Burlane, by dint of strong elbows and his height, soon reached a place, well back, though, where he could see what was toward. The few boxes and seats were for captives and officers; the others must stand.

Barnquist, in the confusion of the entrance, had no difficulty in working his way to a point at Harvison's side; in fact the sheriff, by what he deemed an artful maneuver, edged Barney so that he ended his progress to the room's rear right by the side of the chair the sheriff had picked for him.

Barnquist slumped into the chair with a fine affectation of boredom. His hands were in his pockets; his hat was over his eyes. The buzz of conversation went up in intensity as the others, Pardee and the rest, took seats. Harvison rather pompously ruffled some papers on the table that had been dragged from the rear room for the purposes of the inquest. Barnquist, noting that, rejoiced, for it meant that the room was clear for his plunge.

There came that moment of indecision that precedes all public events, when it seems that matters will drag. Harvison cleared his throat, Alberstone glanced over the folk now pressing more and more closely into the big room.

"I call f'r th' first witness," Alberstone began, "Mr. Peters. Is Mr. Peters here?"

There was a stir in the crowd's center. Peters shouldered his stubby body forward.

Barnquist, his muscles tensed, his face outwardly calm, glanced up naturally, set his hat forward, then back, as one who fidgeted a bit, yawned.

Peters reached the table.

The rapt crowd, intent upon the scene before them, had not heard what Barnquist had, with his ears fixed upon something else outside.

"Mr. Peters," Alberstone began, "I call upon you — "

A little rattle of hooves out behind that no one heard in there, save one.

Barnquist leaned forward, as if to listen to Peters, really to be ready to kick the chair behind him and whip behind the partition into the back room.

"I call upon you to — "

Crash of booming gun! Crash of overset chair! Hurtling of a man's body into the rear room! Babel of tongues! A rush for the door through which he had gone! A jam of men into door space! A surge of men to get out front! Slam of heavy door: rataplan of booming hooves. Yells of: "He's gone, on th' big roan — "

The crowd bulged into the alley to see two men fleeing, the deputy shot — dead. The big roan was ahead, Barnquist on him. . . .

Harvison flicked out his gun, passed his left wrist over his gun-hand to steady it for the long shot; his gun flamed; the rearmost rider toppled, his horse fleeing still, saddle vacant. Now came flash on flash, but still the big roan fled, his rider spurring, and then, in a moment, he had whisked about a shack up the line, plunged through the

upper portion of the rambling cow-town street, — and was gone.

"Hell's bells! Mount, men, ride him down."

So cried Harvison, struggling toward the front of the Thimble Belt. He dashed into the street, to find Burlane swinging up into a saddle.

"Get down; that's my hoss," the sheriff stormed.

"I know it," Ed flared at him; "but I c'n ride a hoss two miles to your one, Harvison. There 's on'y one hoss c'n stop that roan, an' he 's my old Midnight, an' he 's gone. You got th' best hoss, an' I c'n outride you all. Let me go; you-all follow."

Harvison's hand dropped from the bridle.

"Go git him, Young Timer," and he struck the good horse's flanks. "Go git him."

Ed touched the calico of the sheriff's with his heel; he had no spur, having left his spurs, with his guns, at the Wickson house. He did not think of guns then, or of spurs, but only of riding after Barnquist, for he had noted the direction of the man's flight — past empty calaboose, over the farthest rise — toward Twin Springs.

That Barnquist would pause there; that he would not go on and on, straightaway, as far as the roan would carry him, Ed did not believe. But there was the chance that he might see Berenice, and Ed's thoughts of her, so warm, so tender, abhorred that that fleeing man, with his swart

passions, should let even his shadow fall on the soil where his beloved trod the happy ways of girlhood peace.

So Harvison's calico swirled off, and others and others, acting under Harvison's orders, followed after in pursuit. Harvison and Alberstone announced they would remain in town and direct matters from there.

Presently some one thought of Weaver, lying up there in the alley, and Harvison went to him with Alberstone. They found him prone, pipe still clutched in his teeth, his eyes staring wide at the sky.

Harvison bent over the wolf who had been faithful to the traditions of his pack; and felt of the man's shirt front.

The teeth champed on the pipestem once, twice, thrice; the bowl turned over; the last of the hot dottle sparked on the quiet chest; the pipe slithered out, sidewise, over the arch of the bosom to the soil.

Weaver had sputtered out!

CHAPTER XXV

"I CAN HURT HER!"

THERE was a dull flame of rage in Barnquist's heart as he sat the great roan whose thunderous hooves spurned the trail behind him out of Coppered Jack. Once he glanced over his shoulder, just as he left the town, and could see no pursuit. He had succeeded better than he had anticipated!

That Weaver had been shot down beside him occasioned him not a qualm. That the old dog-wolf had fallen so, aiding him, irked not the hate-ridden murderer. He even joyed to think that a halt to inspect Weaver's body would give him some added seconds of safety.

Past the Mexicans on the irrigation ditch without noticing their waved greetings to him, their supposed *patronne,* he urged the roan, who by now was getting into his stride. He swirled up the trail like the passing of a whirlwind, the dust pyramiding up behind him and then hanging over the trail like a tan fog.

He had no weapons. He had no spurs. But

he sat his seat like a centaur, for he had been born to the saddle, and use had given him the mastery of the roan.

He had no set purpose — only to go, to go, to go, to double and twist, if need be, but to get away, to make into Old Mexico, to let the storm blow past, to come back some time, to be in position to vent his rage, when again in a place of power, upon them all. Yes, upon them all.

And, as he neared Twin Springs, came the thought that no one would expect him to turn aside there, for the inference would be plain that he had gone on the straight trail toward Soda and the hither desert. And if he were to strike across country later, southward not northwestward, as the Soda trail led, he would need water for man and beast. There was no one at Twin Springs. He could make in there, get a canteen, water the roan against the all-night ride to the old Quarles place, with its little spring and tumbledown ghost of a house. No one at Twin Springs. They 'd all be at the inquest. He had seen Burlane, damn him, and Peters. The silly girl would be there, too.

"Yes, I 'll do it thataway," he decided, twitching the roan's bridle.

He glanced back. There was no one on the trail following yet. It was safe.

He peered about, arrived before the house. Everything was quiet. The doors were shut, for

Berenice had closed them that the fowls might not enter and run about, as they did when given the opportunity. He pressed the roan to the corral bars, where the trough was. He let him have a little drink, intending to give him a deeper one after a moment's breathing space. He got down, looked about in search of a canteen, when afar, toward the buttes, he caught the flash of a dress near the willows.

He remembered the place, where Berenice so often went, where he had tried to make love to her before Burlane had come.

"So, she's out here — alone, for th' day," he thought.

He swung up, spurred the roan toward her. In a few mighty leaps the big horse had cleared the intervening space, for Berenice already had come part of the way back before he had seen her.

He reined in the horse, that was breathing hardly above normal after the keen push from the town to the Springs, and glowered down at her. There was no passion for her in his heart, no love. There was hate, mean, searing hate, though, and it whispered:

"There she is; hurt her and, through her, all of them."

She glanced up at him bravely, if her face were white, for she could not but read what was darkling in the depths of his mind. She had no de-

fense, for her little gun that she sometimes carried she had left in the house. But there was no quailing in her eyes or in her demeanor.

He said no word, but the hate in him spoke for him. She gave him, glance for glance, proof that she was not daunted.

"Damn you!" he bellowed, his face flushed with rage. *"I 'll have it out on you, on you, no matter what comes."*

He twitched the horse, tried to make him trample her down as she stood there swaying, nimble-witted, the sweet courage of the native Texans burning clear in the depths of her soul. She swerved aside and, indeed, the roan failed him in his purpose, for no horse, unless in blind rage, likes to trample living human flesh.

"Damn you," he roared, leaning in his saddle and striking at her with clenched fists as she flashed under the horse's flank by a scant inch of safety. "I 'll have it out on you, *on you!*"

She started to run, — swiftly, her shabby calico skirt swishing, her stubbed-out little shoes flicking back and forth.

He whirled the horse as if on a pivot and, fine horseman as he was, tooled him forward. He knew better than to seek to make the horse trample her again; his common sense told him the roan would not, for the dumb brute was kinder than his human-devil rider.

Berenice ran well, with courage, with hope, de-

termined not to yield until the very last. The purpose, the hope of Barnquist she had read in his blazing eyes, sensed in his fist as it had swished past her ear.

But ran she never so well, the thrumming hooves were upon her. She tried to swerve, to dodge —

Barnquist snapped the reins up between his teeth, leaving his hands free!

Then, letting himself down as a trick rider does in picking up a handkerchief, he had her. His mighty back muscles, the hate-power in him, gave him the strength to do what seemed impossible even to him, for he swung her up, fighting against it. Then he had her across his saddle; his hands, free of reins, toyed with her, one under her shoulders, fast gripped into her clothing, the other seeking her throat. The big roan thundered on, mad now with excitement. He felt her go limp in his arms.

Of a sudden the excess of fury left him. He crushed her to his breast with one arm, and she was as a feather in his grasp. He seized the reins from his teeth with his other hand, snubbed the roan down, twitched him about and then turned him off toward the springs, for the protection of the screen of the willows. For over his hatred a saving gleam of caution had returned, and he hoped to get behind the willows before any one came in sight along the main trail.

As Ed, on Harvison's horse, flew down the street, he realized that he was beginning a losing chase, for the first few bounds told him that the sheriff's calico, big as he was, was not fast enough to run down the big roan, and then Harvison, a heavy man, never had ridden at that nerve-racking pace that a range rider can attain to, so his calico was a bit soft.

Yet, for the first burst, he went beautifully, low-skimming, eager on the bit, willing. Ed nursed him along. He knew Barnquist would not leave the open trail in full view of the Mexican laborers and thus expose his point of departure and probable direction of flight. So he rode boldly until the irrigation gangs were passed. Once he called if Barnquist had passed, and a dark-skin answered:

"Si, Señor, poco pronto," and laughed.

So Ed pushed the calico with hope, not that he could ride down the roan, but that he could get some clue to Barnquist's going, to his probable destination, in order to pass it on to whichever of the posse might come along later, with perhaps a faster horse than he had or a more enduring.

He kept watch of the trail and saw the marks of the big roan's hooves. He swept past the Twin Springs side-fork, then missed the big hoof-prints in the trail of the teamsters' ruts. Fear chilled his heart, and he turned the calico aside

sharply and they made off, across ways to the Twin Springs fork.

Fear sat perched like an evil bird on Ed's shoulder as the calico bore him into the little ranch yard. He saw the dripping troughs, heard the hens cackling in alarm, as over some recent disturbance, glanced all about, then his gaze swept afar, drawn by a flutter of something just where the willow-screen about the springs was. He saw the great roan, the huge man atop him, the flicker of the faded calico he knew so well —

Then he smashed into the saddle firmly, fairly lifted the astounded calico forward with his will urgent and dominant, and they made for the willows. He felt, as by instinct, for his guns, but of course found none. He doubted if Barnquist had a gun, and cared not if he had. He wanted but one boon of Providence, — to come at the man, to be at grips with him.

The calico smashed through the willows — into the open space beyond — past the brimming springs so sparkling in the westering sunshine.

Out beyond was mocking laughter, the thrum of hooves, the flutter of faded calico. Barnquist had taken to the open spaces, yet he was riding in line with the willows in such a way that for quite a distance he would be screened from the main trail.

Burlane lifted the gallant calico again — again — *again!* The tireless, effortless ease of the big

roan mocked him. Carrying Barnquist, the slight added burden of the girl but made up for the difference in weight between the hard-bitten if huge son, and the softer but heavier father, to whose weight the roan had been accustomed. So, seemingly without limit of power, the roan spurned the prairie sod behind him.

Again Burlane called on the calico; but the roan remained well ahead.

Suddenly Barnquist was seen by Ed to throw the roan to his haunches, and he slithered and slid to a stop. Burlane thought he was yielding or about to shoot, but he saw the man raise the girl, as if to dash her to the earth, and he reined in his horse as well.

"I got you where I want you, Burlane," Barnquist called, smiling to see Ed pause so. "I doubt if you 've a gun, or you 'd used it by now. You all had to turn in your weaponry before th' inquest opened."

"I 'll break you, yet, Barnquist, break you in bits," Ed called back, reaching out his bare hands toward the other.

"When you get me, mebbe so, Burlane. I got you now. I can hurt you — through her. I 'll do it; I 'll tear her in bits before your eyes."

He laughed, crushed her to him, spoke to the roan and again they sped on.

The possibility that the man-devil would dash Berenice beneath the hooves of his horse tortured

Ed; the fear that the calico would give out maddened him. Already the horse was suffering. Barnquist's, with the sip of pure water to go on, was fresh and keen. Ed's mount, taken thirsty from the town's warm center, already suffered from thirst. His tongue hung out; he breathed deeply.

They had left Twin Springs and the main trail behind the rolls of prairie. They were far off to one side of the traveled way, alone. The sun was westering fast.

Burlane lifted the calico again — again. He responded, then staggered. Ed pulled him upright. The roan was gaining fast.

And now Barnquist swung south, toward the main trail again. Ed divined his purpose, — to cut across it to make south. He lifted the calico again, called on him for all he was worth. The gallant steed put forth his reserves, almost gained on the roan for a final awful mile, then began to tire visibly. A cloud of dust off beyond the Twin Springs fork told that the posse had ridden right through toward Soda, overrunning the sign toward the Springs.

And still the huge roan, like a machine, put the distance behind him, easeful, strong.

To Burlane came the mocking laughter of the man who held against his great breast all that Ed held dear; he caught the flutter of the faded little calico skirt. They flashed across the trail, just

at the end of the ditching. The Mexicans yelled wildly, yammering, frightened. There Ed felt he was definitely beaten on the calico horse, — yet that on him alone depended the outcome, for the posse had gone wrong, toward Soda, and he only had the right track.

A mile beyond the main trail the dusk began to come down. The calico, no longer swift, was faltering, yet Ed held it up by sheer force of will. He lifted him at times, and then the roan seemed not to make such headway by way of contrast.

The weary miles passed, and still ahead went the roan. He seemed to tire not, to falter not; yet ever the calico was wearing down, inch by fatal inch.

With the last of the daylight Ed had the tireless roan still in sight, — a mere speck against the darkling skyline. And then the calico swerved badly.

Ed called on him for a last effort. There was no will to yield in Burlane's mind; his will was all to keep going. He gripped the calico between his strong knees, pleaded with him, lifted him, nursed him. It seemed as if he, the indomitable rider, were the driving force, the horse but living and speeding because he bade him to. It was as if he, of his powers of will, were forcing the horse to live, to move, were carrying him between his knees — onward — forward. Ah!

The end came suddenly. Just as the light

failed and the roan slipped from sight in the umber distance, the gallant calico collapsed, slithering down. Ed barely saved himself from being caught underneath and rolled free. And then, without a backward glance, determined, not willing to own defeat, his spirit straining forward toward the woman he loved, he ran like a greyhound, his long-heeled boots striking firmly into the earth, his elbows by his sides, his breath coming, going, in rhythm. He did not spare himself; he drove himself, he bounded forward, a man against a splendid horse, with no chance of victory so afoot, with only the driving force of his great love to hold him up, — his love and the thought of what would happen if —

He had nothing to guide him. The roan had vanished in the darkness. Ed was trusting that Barnquist would keep on as he had started. He panted; his tongue clove to his mouth's roof; his lungs seemed about to burst; his heart had in it a dull, grinding pain, yet he ran — he ran —

He stumbled, he fell, arose, ran again; gasped, staggered forward, walked, fell. Yet, as he fell, he clutched at the grass and strove to pull himself forward toward her, if only an inch, in his agony of body, soul, heart, mind. Then Nature, outraged, took her due; he collapsed. He had gone the limit — the end — and Berenice —

A great sob welled up inside him.

"Oh, for Midnight, my Midnight!"

So his soul's wish was breathed to the empty air. He gasped, his body quivered; he relaxed with a long, shuddering sigh, — futile, helpless — blackness enveloped him —

CHAPTER XXVI

"YOU 'RE MINE NOW!"

BACKWARD glances had told Barnquist of the distress of Burlane's horse long before dark. He had noted the collapse of the calico with the coming of dusk and knew that he had the game in his hands. The girl, after he had choked her at the Springs, had remained inert in his grasp, save when she aroused herself feebly and struggled against his chest. He eased her back and forth at times. His purpose in regard to her was not plain, even to himself, except for this.

He knew that by bearing her off he was blackening the lives of others and her own as well. To carry her away, to break her down, to soil her, would be to joy over them all in his own evil, mean fashion. And he meant to do it.

To Berenice the ride was a nightmare of stresses, ghostlike pains, wrenches, horrors of mind and body. His fingers on her throat had been an agony, his crushing hug scarcely less torturing. She was as a babe in his power.

After the dark came, Barnquist rode more steadily, ever south. He wanted to make that

deserted Quarles homestead, where he knew there was water and shelter for a time, where he could get the roan under cover. He had seen the place when riding herd on the open range below Ox Bow, and he judged he could make it before midnight, or before dawn came.

Once, as he rode, a great black shape appeared from out of the dark, a neigh of greeting came, to which the roan did not reply. The big black horse, a wild one, he thought, kept pace a bit, then swerved onto the nearest roll of land.

Barnquist spurred on. Soon the hackberries of the deserted house loomed ahead; then he was there. He put his head to the ground, after dismounting and laying the girl down. No thrum of pursuit came to him, so if any one were on his trail they were yet a long, long way off. He tethered the roan in the grove of hackberries, after watering him sparingly. Then he picked up the girl and carried her to the house. The door yawned. He went in, placed her on the floor and tied her ankles with his 'kerchief. He lighted a match, found a cold chimney, scraped some rubbish into it. Soon he had a crackling blaze going, and by its red, dancing light he looked at her, so crushed, so wan, so pale.

He had no food, but he cared not for that. He might have gotten some water for her. Indeed, he got a drink for himself; but he offered her none.

Presently she stirred and opened her eyes. She tried to get up wildly. He laughed as her bound ankles threw her prone.

She looked at him, then at the fire, but her pride kept her silent. She drew herself together, remained sitting.

"I don't know what you intend to do," she said, her voice brave yet, "but you shall not frighten me."

"I won't?" bending forward. "I will. I 'll break you; I 'll tear you to bits, Berenice Peters. You had your father drive me away w'en I was wo'th havin' an' now that I 'm not wo'th it I 'll have you, I 'll have you. . . ."

His fury shook him, he bent forward as if to strike her, then he laughed, held his arm back.

"No; there 's a better way than that — when we 're off down in Old Meixco, an' you 're mine, mine! Now, I got to use all my wits to get away — with you — "

He sat, glowering at her, gnawing his finger nails, muttering.

"You 'll never break me," she answered bravely; "never, never."

He spat malevolently, grinned. She struggled to get up — rolled toward the door. He was on her in a single leap; he yanked her upright, struck her once, leaving a cruel weal on her temple. Then he threw her into a corner, growling:

"I 'll break you, in bits — you 're mine; nothin'

matters now — but hurtin' them all — through you, you — "

Into the blackening swirl of his exhaustion and despair something thrust its way into the inner portal of Burlane's consciousness. He was lying on his back. His face was being brushed by something. He thrust out and struck something soft. He felt the blackness closing in again.

Again something soft brushed his face. His ears drank in a sound that —

He struck out, open-palmed, at something that was pressed to his cheek. Again that sound, calling to his heart's depths. A whicker, deep-toned, full-chested. Something was nuzzling his cheek, under his chin, into his bosom —

He gasped — got hold of a mane —

"Oh, Midnight; oh, Midnight!"

He staggered upright, holding on to the mane of the horse that seemed to grow out of his delirium.

Again came the whicker.

"Ol' son-of-a-gun."

Ed's arms went about the stallion's neck. He swayed there, the horse calling deep love notes to him.

"Ol' cuss. Oh, you beauty!"

And so, in the dark, they drank of each other's love for a moment or two. Then the recollection of how he had come there beat back into Ed's

aching brain. He caught at the mane, swung himself up, barebacked. The horse, joying to feel the wonted weight on him, thinking it was a barebacked frolic, such as Ed often gave him, pranced in the dark. Ed swayed, all but fell, he was so weak.

"Steady, boy, now; steady, Midnight, ol' son-of-a-gun!"

So he gentled him, and the brainy stallion steadied. Ed, feeling the heave of horseflesh under him, strove for a clear brain, got it. Then the hopelessness of the situation overwhelmed him. How was he to find Barnquist in that sea of land that rolled on all sides? He did not even know, now, in which direction he had last seen the ravisher. The clouds hung low; there were no stars to guide him, no wind.

"You play this hand, ol' cuss," Burlane said, lax in his unsaddled seat from weakness and pain. "I 'm to my limit; I 'll let you ramble away, an' with th' earliest light I 'll look for sign."

Midnight, finding no direction was given him, drifted slowly, steadily. He had been away from the spring at the hackberry grove all day. He wanted a drink. Now, if the man-god on him wanted one —

He began to walk, then to lope. Ed, by now recovered, feeling from the animal's going that he had a purpose, held on. And the ride nerved him, toned him.

After what seemed a long, long time, Ed felt that they were among trees. The night was black. Midnight had entered the hackberry grove on the side opposite the house. Ed heard the horse drink. He staggered down and drank also, washed his face, hands, neck, revived wonderfully.

Then he looked about. He saw the flicker of light beyond the trees, the outlines of windows. And then he remembered the deserted homestead there. He knew where he was now. He spoke to Midnight to follow, and the stallion, like an obedient dog, came after. Ed stepped into the open, a horse whickered. Midnight answered. Ed looked — and saw, between him and the flickering, shifting fire gleams from the empty window frames, the form of the great roan horse.

Ed laughed aloud and called:

"Barnquist, come out — "

There was a sound of a leaping body within. Ed plunged forward, into the open door. As he did so, the man scuttled for the back door. Ed saw the huddled heap covered with faded calico in the corner, and hurtled after the other, — to find the all but useless door slammed in his face as Barnquist got through a hand's grasp ahead of him. The old door jammed in its frame; Ed tugged at it, wrestled with it blindly — fell into a panic at his error — wheeled back toward the front door, only to hear the thrum of hooves

again, as the roan, Barnquist riding, swept out of the deserted farmstead's yard.

Ed sped back. The girl had struggled upright and he saw the weal on her forehead where she had been struck by the brute in his anger. He was swept by fury; leaped over the threshold and called:

"Ho, Midnight!"

With a squeal of joy the great black stallion came, eager, sniffing. Ed leaped on his back. Out beyond he could hear the beat of the roan's hooves. He called on Midnight, his own strength mounting under the emergency's urge. The thin-thighed legs of him gripped the hard sides of the big steed; he felt the pulsing rhythm of his stride, and then they were away, under the now clearing sky, and, in the dim light of the fading moon, he could see the roan topping the nearest prairie swell.

"Now, Midnight. You never failed me!"

The black, like a shot from a bow, unleashed the fury of his mighty muscles as he caught the direction of the chase. No tame cayuse he, no pampered son of city streets! He knew, as by instinct, that the other horse was the quarry his man-god sought, as he knew, when on the round-up, which steer was meant to be cut out. Though the dark closed in, he would follow by sound, by scent. Though the roan were an eagle, he would descry him in mid-air.

"Oh, Midnight, *if you love me.*"

Love him! Now the mighty thews of the stallion flexed and reflexed. His belly fairly laid to the ground; his hooves drummed a wild rataplan.

"Oh, if you love me!"

Love him! Do men ever know the love a good horse or faithful dog feels for its master! Love him!

Midnight burst into greater effort, and now, atop the next rise, the roan loomed against the skyline. And Ed patted the heaving flank of the gallant stallion.

Again he called on Midnight and as a reward could hear plainly the roar of the roan's hoofbeats. Ed, riding bareback, as he never had ridden before, was fired to the toe-tips with energy. He had but one mind, one purpose: to catch hold of the beast in front, to tear him from the back of his horse — to —

"Oh, Midnight, do you love me? Please, Midnight."

The dark earth, spurned behind, was like a sheet of brown. And now, just ahead, was the roan, — strong, enduring, nearer, nearer, foot by foot.

The oaths of Barnquist came floating back to Ed. Neither could think of gopher holes, of all the dangers of night riding on the plains.

Ed lifted on Midnight who, stung with the affront of it, leaped into a yet wilder stride. And

at that mighty effort, he came, as by magic, head to wither beside the roan, and then, inch by inch, Ed crept along until side by side they raced together.

"If you love me, Midnight —"

A last mighty burst of that matchless speed, that glorious effort!

Gripping the black's heaving sides, with his knees, one hand wound in his mane, Ed reached.

He tore the great evil bulk from the saddle with one awful, resistless heave. The roan raced away, riderless. The bulk crashed to the soil. Ed, even while the black raced, swung down, flicking right leg over to left side, hands on mane, and landed upright, thanks to his high heels. So, when Barnquist flung himself upright, it was to find the big range rider towering over him.

Midnight, wheeling, as he knew he should, stood a few yards away.

Silence now, as eye sought for eye in the dark. Then came the crash of meeting bodies, tug of strong hands, gasps of breath from mighty lungs, a single wild, awful, straining upthrust. Then a form shot over the head of a man and came crashing down, — thrown clean, fair, a broken, wrecked mass —

"We 'll leave him there, old Midnight," Ed, panting, leaned on Midnight's shoulder. "We 'll leave him there. It would poison the earth to bury him."

Midnight turned, man-hate being incomprehensible to him, and nipped playfully at Ed's hand.

"Quit, darned nuisance," and Ed batted him with his palm.

Then he swung up and rode toward the deserted house. The distance it had taken perhaps half an hour to traverse at that awful speed it took an hour to recover. He lost his way for a time, by trying to find the route himself, then, remembering that Midnight had drifted there, finally let him go as he would.

Dawn was coming when he found the hackberry clump. He turned the horse loose and went toward the house. He feared to approach, much as he wanted to. Her condition? What would it be? He thought of the harm that might have been done, of the weal on her forehead, and blamed himself for the unreasoning hatred that had swept him out to slay when he should have remained to succor. He felt guilty, uneasy.

Berenice was seated in the doorway, leaning wearily against the rotting jamb. He came quietly, and she did not hear him until he was almost upon her. She shrank at the first sound, then stood up and opened her arms with a happy little cry. He came forward, swept her inside his embrace.

"Are you safe? Did he hurt you bad, Bernie?" he asked eagerly.

"No and yes. But not as he intended; you

came too soon, Ed, you saved me — from the — the worst — " nestling to him.

" Thank God! "

He drew her to him. He sought to kiss her. Something came between their faces: black, soft, velvety. Ed tried to push it aside, rubbed it; she laughed gleefully. Again it came, caressingly nuzzling in between them. They heard a deep-chested whicker.

" Darned old son-of-a-gun," Ed said fondly, dodging the interfering muzzle; " you, Midnight, behave; can't I kiss my sweetheart even, but *you* must horn in? "

And Midnight? He just whickered and nuzzled.

The dawn-wind came, sweet, pure, clean. The light gained. The world was new for them as they three, so loving, loved, faced the sun rising in the rose-broidered east.

" Darned old son-of-a-gun! "

And Midnight? He whickered again, and with his rumbling love-call chimed the rippling laughter of Berenice, on her face and in her eyes the gleams that were reflected from the new-risen god of day who was smiling so kindly and encouragingly upon the newness of their surrender, each to each.

THE END

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